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Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective

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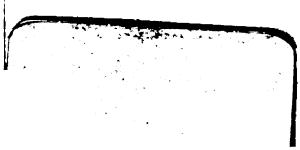

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William Henson
from
Cora Grant.

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MISS MADELYN MACK, DETECTIVE

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"AS THE DOOR CLOSED, I SAW THAT MADELYN WAS STILL BALANCING RALEIGH'S PIPE." (*See page 22*)

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Miss Delphi Mack, Detective

By

Hugh C. Weir

Illustrated

The Page Company
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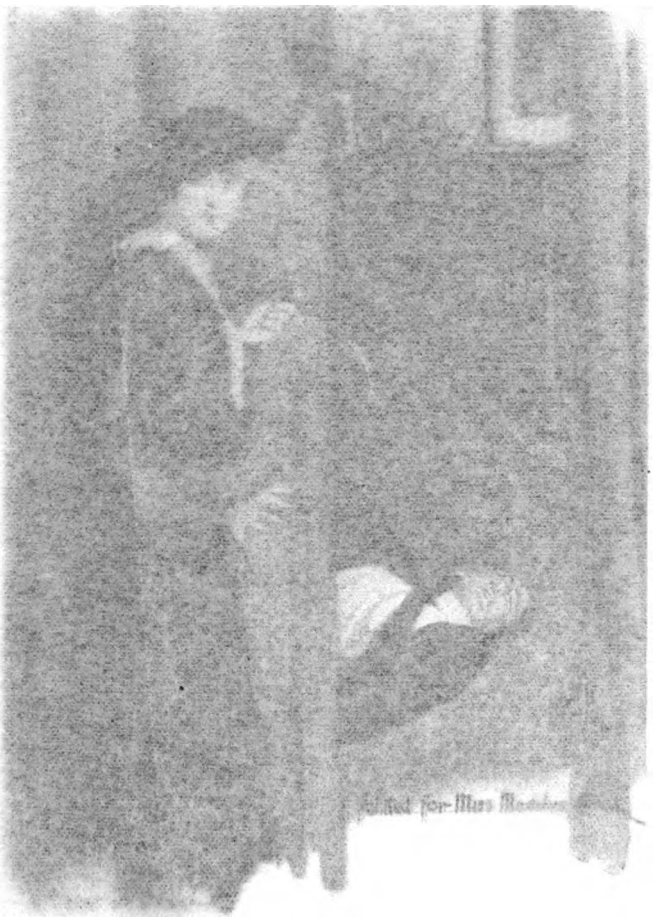

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Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective

By

Hugh C. Weir

Illustrated

The Page Company
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TO

MARY HOLLAND

THIS IS YOUR BOOK. IT IS YOU, WOMAN DETECTIVE OF REAL LIFE, WHO SUGGESTED MADELYN. IT WAS THE STORIES TOLD ME FROM YOUR OWN NOTE-BOOK OF MEN'S KNAVERY THAT SUGGESTED THESE EXPLOITS OF MISS MACK. NONE SHOULD KNOW BETTER THAN YOU THAT THE RIDDLES OF FICTION FALL EVER SHORT OF THE RIDDLES OF TRUTH. WHAT PLOT OF THE NOVELIST COULD EQUAL THE GROTESQUENESS OF YOUR AFFAIR OF THE MYSTIC CIRCLE, OR THE SUBTLENESS OF YOUR CHICAGO UNIVERSITY EXPLOIT OF THE EGYPTIAN BAR? I PRAY YOU, HOWEVER, IN THE FULLNESS OF YOUR GENEROSITY TO GIVE MADELYN WELCOME — NOT AS A RIVAL BUT AS A STUDENT. H. C. W.

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The publishers wish to acknowledge the courtesy of The Kalem Moving Picture Company in allowing the use as illustrations of the photographs of Miss Alice Joyce in the character of "Madelyn Mack."

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MISS MADELYN MACK, DETECTIVE

I

THE MAN WITH NINE LIVES

I

Now that I seek a point of beginning in the curious comradeship between Madelyn Mack and myself, the weird problems of men's knavery that we have confronted together come back to me with almost a shock.

Perhaps the events which crowd into my memory followed each other too swiftly for thoughtful digest at the time of their occurrence. Perhaps only a sober retrospect can supply a properly appreciative angle of view.

Madelyn Mack! What newspaper reader does not know the name? Who, even among the most casual followers of public events, does not recall the young woman who found the missing heiress,

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Virginia Denton, after a three months' disappearance; who convicted "Archie" Irwin, chief of the "fire bug trust;" who located the absconder, Wolcott, after a pursuit from Chicago to Khartoom; who solved the riddle of the double Peterson murder; who —

But why continue the enumeration of Miss Mack's achievements? They are of almost household knowledge, at least that portion which, from one cause or another, have found their way into the newspaper columns. Doubtless those admirers of Miss Mack, whose opinions have been formed through the press-chronicles of her exploits, would be startled to know that not one in ten of her cases has ever been recorded outside of her own file cases. And many of them — the most sensational from a newspaper viewpoint — will never be!

It is the woman, herself, however, who has seemed to me always a greater mystery than any of the problems to whose unraveling she has brought her wonderful genius. In spite of the deluge of printer's ink that she has inspired, I question if it has been given to more than a dozen persons to know the true Madelyn Mack.

I do not refer, of course, to her professional career. The salient points of that portion of her life, I presume, are more or less generally known

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— the college girl confronted suddenly with the necessity of earning her own living; the epidemic of mysterious "shop-lifting" cases chronicled in the newspaper she was studying for employment advertisements; her application to the New York department stores, that had been victimized, for a place on their detective staffs, and their curt refusal; her sudden determination to undertake the case as a free lance, and her remarkable success, which resulted in the conviction of the notorious Madame Bousard, and which secured for Miss Mack her first position as assistant house-detective with the famous Niegel dry-goods firm. I sometimes think that this first case, and the realization which it brought her of her peculiar talent, is Madelyn's favorite — that its place in her memory is not even shared by the recovery of Mrs. Niegel's fifty-thousand-dollar pearl necklace, stolen a few months after the employment of the college girl detective at the store, and the reward for which, incidentally, enabled the ambitious Miss Mack to open her own office.

Next followed the Bergner kidnapping case, which gave Madelyn her first big advertising broadside, and which brought the beginning of the steady stream of business that resulted, after three years, in her Fifth Avenue suite in the Maddox Building, where I found her on that — to me — memorable

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afternoon when a sapient Sunday editor dispatched me for an interview with the woman who had made so conspicuous a success in a man's profession.

I can see Madelyn now, as I saw her then — my first close-range view of her. She had just returned from Omaha that morning, and was planning to leave for Boston on the midnight express. A suitcase and a fat portfolio of papers lay on a chair in a corner. A young woman stenographer was taking a number of letters at an almost incredible rate of dictation. Miss Mack finished the last paragraph as she rose from a flat-top desk to greet me.

I had vaguely imagined a masculine-appearing woman, curt of voice, sharp of feature, perhaps dressed in a severe, tailor-made gown. I saw a young woman of maybe twenty-five, with red and white cheeks, crowned by a softly waved mass of dull gold hair, and a pair of vivacious, grey-blue eyes that at once made one forget every other detail of her appearance. There was a quality in the eyes which for a long time I could not define. Gradually I came to know that it was the spirit of optimism, of joy in herself, and in her life, and in her work, the exhilaration of doing things. And there was something contagious in it. Almost unconsciously you found yourself *believing* in her and in her sincerity.

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Nor was there a suggestion foreign to her sex in my appraisal. She was dressed in a simply embroidered white shirt-waist and white broadcloth skirt. One of Madelyn's few peculiarities is that she always dresses either in complete white or complete black. On her desk was a jar of white chrysanthemums.

"How do I do it?" she repeated, in answer to my question, in a tone that was almost a laugh. "Why — just by hard work, I suppose. Oh, there isn't anything wonderful about it! You can do almost anything, you know, if you make yourself really *think* you can! I am not at all unusual or abnormal. I work out my problems just as I would work out a problem in mathematics, only instead of figures I deal with human motives. A detective is always given certain known factors, and I keep building them up, or subtracting them, as the case may be, until I know that the answer *must* be correct.

"There are only two real rules for a successful detective, hard work and common sense — not uncommon sense such as we associate with our old friend, Sherlock Holmes, but common, *business* sense. And, of course, imagination! That may be one reason why I have made what you call a success. A woman, I think, always has a more acute imagination than a man!"

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"Do you then prefer women operatives on your staff?" I asked.

She glanced up with something like a twinkle from the jade paper-knife in her hands.

"Shall I let you into a secret? All of my staff, with the exception of my stenographer, are men. But I do most of my work in person. The factor of imagination can't very well be used second, or third, or fourth handed. And then, if I fail, I can only blame Madelyn Mack! Some day," — the gleam in her grey-blue eyes deepened, — "some day I hope to reach a point where I can afford to do only consulting work or personal investigation. The business details of an office staff, I am afraid, are a bit too much of routine for me!"

The telephone jingled. She spoke a few crisp sentences into the receiver, and turned. The interview was over.

When I next saw her, three months later, we met across the body of Morris Anthony, the murdered bibliophic. It was a chance discovery of mine which Madelyn was good enough to say suggested to her the solution of the affair, and which brought us together in the final melodramatic climax in the grim mansion on Washington Square, when I presume my hysterical warning saved her from the fangs of Dr. Lester Randolph's hidden cobra. In any event, our acquaintanceship crystal-

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lized gradually into a comradeship, which revolutionized two angles of my life.

Not only did it bring to me the stimulus of Madelyn Mack's personality, but it gave me exclusive access to a fund of newspaper "copy" that took me from scant-paid Sunday "features" to a "space" arrangement in the city room, with an income double that which I had been earning. I have always maintained that in our relationship Madelyn gave all, and I contributed nothing. Although she invariably made instant disclaimer, and generally ended by carrying me up to the "Rosary," her chalet on the Hudson, as a cure for what she termed my attack of the "blues," she was never able to convince me that my protest was not justified!

It was at the "Rosary" where Miss Mack found haven from the stress of business. She had copied its design from an ivy-tangled Swiss chalet that had attracted her fancy during a summer vacation ramble through the Alps, and had built it on a jagged bluff of the river at a point near enough to the city to permit of fairly convenient motoring, although, during the first years of our friendship, when she was held close to the commercial grindstone, weeks often passed without her being able to snatch a day there. In the end, it was the gratitude of Chalmers Walker for her remarkable work

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which cleared his chorus-girl wife from the seemingly unbreakable coil of circumstantial evidence in the murder of Dempster, the theatrical broker, that enabled Madelyn to realize her long-cherished dream of setting up as a consulting expert. Although she still maintained an office in town, it was confined to one room and a small reception hall, and she limited her attendance there to two days of the week. During the remainder of the time, when not engaged directly on a case, she seldom appeared in the city at all. Her flowers and her music — she was passionately devoted to both — appeared to content her effectually.

I charged her with growing old, to which she replied with a shrug. I upbraided her as a cynic, and she smiled inscrutably. But the manner of her life was not changed. In a way I envied her. It was almost like looking down on the world and watching tolerantly its mad scramble for the rainbow's end. The days I snatched at the "Rosary," particularly in the summer, when Madelyn's garden looked like nothing so much as a Turner picture, left me with almost a repulsion for the grind of Park Row. But a workaday newspaper woman cannot indulge the dreams of a genius whom fortune has blessed. Perhaps this was why Madelyn's invitations came with a frequency and a subtleness that could not be resisted. Somehow they always

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reached me when I was in just the right receptive mood.

It was late on a Thursday afternoon of June, the climax of a racking five days for me under the blistering Broadway sun, that Madelyn's motor caught me at the *Bugle* office, and Madelyn insisted on bundling me into the tonneau without even a suitcase.

"We'll reach the Rosary in time for a fried chicken supper," she promised. "What you need is four or five days' rest where you can't smell the asphalt."

"You fairy godmother!" I breathed as I snuggled down on the cushions.

Neither of us knew that already the crimson trail of crime was twisting toward us — that within twelve hours we were to be pitchforked from a quiet week-end's rest into the vortex of tragedy.

II

We had breakfasted late and leisurely. When at length we had finished, Madelyn had insisted on having her phonograph brought to the rose-garden, and we were listening to Sturveysant's matchless rendering of "The Jewel Song" — one of the three records for which Miss Mack had sent the harpist her check for two hundred dollars the day before.

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I had taken the occasion to read her a lazy lesson on extravagance. The beggar had probably done the work in less than two hours!

As the plaintive notes quivered to a pause, Susan, Madelyn's housekeeper, crossed the garden, and laid a little stack of letters and the morning papers on a rustic table by our bench. Madelyn turned to her correspondence with a shrug.

"From the divine to the prosaic!"

Susan sniffed with the freedom of seven years of service.

"I heard one of them Dago fiddling chaps at Hammerstein's last week who could beat that music with his eyes closed!"

Madelyn stared at her sorrowfully.

"At your age — Hammerstein's!"

Susan tossed her prim rows of curls, glanced contemptuously at the phonograph by way of retaliation, and made a dignified retreat. In the doorway she turned.

"Oh, Miss Madelyn, I am baking one of your old-fashioned strawberry shortcakes for lunch!"

"Really?" Madelyn raised a pair of sparkling eyes. "Susan, you're a dear!"

A contented smile wreathed Susan's face even to the tips of her precise curls. Madelyn's gaze crossed to me.

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"What are you chuckling over, Nora?"

"From a psychological standpoint, the pair of you have given me two interesting studies," I laughed. "A single sentence compensates Susan for a week of your glumness!"

Madelyn extended a hand toward her mail.

"And what is the other feature that appeals to your dissecting mind?"

"Fancy a world-known detective rising to the point of enthusiasm at the mention of strawberry shortcake!"

"Why not? Even a detective has to be human once in a while!" Her eyes twinkled. "Another point for my memoirs, Miss Noraker!"

As her gaze fell to the half-opened letter in her hand, my eyes traveled across the garden to the outlines of the chalet, and I breathed a sigh of utter content. Broadway and Park Row seemed very, very far away. In a momentary swerving of my gaze, I saw that a line as clear cut as a pencil-stroke had traced itself across Miss Mack's forehead.

The suggestion of lounging indifference in her attitude had vanished like a wind-blown veil. Her glance met mine suddenly. The twinkle I had last glimpsed in her eyes had disappeared. Silently she pushed a square sheet of close, cramped writing across the table to me.

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"My Dear Madam:

"When you read this, it is quite possible that it will be a letter from a dead man.

"I have been told by no less an authority than my friend, Cosmo Hamilton, that you are a remarkable woman. While I will say at the outset that I have little faith in the analytical powers of the feminine brain, I am prepared to accept Hamilton's judgment.

"I cannot, of course, discuss the details of my problem in correspondence.

"As a spur to quick action, I may say, however, that, during the past five months, my life has been attempted no fewer than eight different times, and I am convinced that the ninth attempt, if made, will be successful. The curious part of it lies in the fact that I am absolutely unable to guess the reason for the persistent vendetta. So far as I know, there is no person in the world who should desire my removal. And yet I have been shot at from ambush on four occasions, thugs have rushed me once, a speeding automobile has grazed me twice, and this evening I found a cunning little dose of cya-

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nide of potassium in my favorite cherry pie!

"All of this, too, in the shadow of a New Jersey skunk farm! It is high time, I fancy, that I secure expert advice. Should the progress of the mysterious vendetta, by any chance, render me unable to receive you personally, my niece, Miss Muriel Jansen, I am sure, will endeavor to act as a substitute.

"Respectfully Yours,

"WENDELL MARSH."

"THREE FORKS JUNCTION, N. J.,
June 16."

At the bottom of the page a lead pencil had scrawled the single line in the same cramped writing:

"For God's sake, hurry!"

Madelyn retained her curled-up position on the bench, staring across at a bush of deep crimson roses.

"Wendell Marsh?" She shifted her glance to me musingly. "Haven't I seen that name somewhere lately?" (Madelyn pays me the compliment of saying that I have a card-index brain for newspaper history!)

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"If you have read the Sunday supplements," I returned drily, with a vivid remembrance of Wendell Marsh as I had last seen him, six months before, when he crossed the gang-plank of his steamer, fresh from England, his face browned from the Atlantic winds. It was a face to draw a second glance — almost gaunt, self-willed, with more than a hint of cynicism. (Particularly when his eyes met the waiting press group!) Some one had once likened him to the pictures of Oliver Cromwell.

"Wendell Marsh is one of the greatest newspaper copy-makers that ever dodged an interviewer," I explained. "He hates reporters like an upstate farmer hates an automobile, and yet has a flock of them on his trail constantly. His latest exploit to catch the spot-light was the purchase of the Bainford relics in London. Just before that he published a three-volume history on 'The World's Great Cynics.' Paid for the publication himself."

Then came a silence between us, prolonging itself. I was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to associate Wendell Marsh's half-hysterical letter with my mental picture of the austere millionaire. . . .

"For God's sake, hurry!"

What wrenching terror had reduced the ultra-reserved Mr. Marsh to an appeal like this? As I

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look back now I know that my wildest fancy could not have pictured the ghastliness of the truth!

Madelyn straightened abruptly.

"Susan, will you kindly tell Andrew to bring around the car at once? If you will find the New Jersey automobile map, Nora, we'll locate Three Forks Junction."

"You are going down?" I asked mechanically.

She slipped from the bench.

"I am beginning to fear," she said irrelevantly, "that we'll have to defer our strawberry shortcake!"

III

THE sound eye of Daniel Peddicord, liveryman by avocation, and sheriff of Merino County by election, drooped over his florid left cheek. Mr. Peddicord took himself and his duties to the tax-payers of Merino County seriously.

Having lowered his sound eye with befitting official dubiousness, while his glass eye stared guilelessly ahead, as though it took absolutely no notice of the procedure, Mr. Peddicord jerked a fat, red thumb toward the winding stairway at the rear of the Marsh hall.

"I reckon as how Mr. Marsh is still up there, Miss Mack. You see, I told 'em not to disturb the body until —"

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Our stares brought the sentence to an abrupt end. Mr. Peddicord's sound eye underwent a violent agitation.

"You don't mean that you haven't — heard?"

The silence of the great house seemed suddenly oppressive. For the first time I realized the oddity of our having been received by an ill-at-ease policeman instead of by a member of the family. I was abruptly conscious of the incongruity between Mr. Peddicord's awkward figure and the dim, luxurious background.

Madelyn gripped the chief's arm, bringing his sound eye circling around to her face.

"Tell me what has happened!"

Mr. Peddicord drew a huge red handkerchief over his forehead.

"Wendell Marsh was found dead in his library at eight o'clock this morning! He had been dead for hours."

Tick-tock! Tick-tock! Through my daze beat the rhythm of a tall, gaunt clock in the corner. I stared at it dully. Madelyn's hands had caught themselves behind her back, her veins swollen into sharp blue ridges. Mr. Peddicord still gripped his red handkerchief.

"It sure is queer you hadn't heard! I reckoned as how that was what had brought you down. It — it looks like murder!"

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In Madelyn's eyes had appeared a greyish glint like cold steel.

"Where is the body?"

"Up-stairs in the library. Mr. Marsh had worked —"

"Will you kindly show me the room?"

I do not think we noted at the time the crispness in her tones, certainly not with any resentment. Madelyn had taken command of the situation quite as a matter of course.

"Also, will you have my card sent to the family?"

Mr. Peddicord stuffed his handkerchief back into a rear trousers' pocket. A red corner protruded in jaunty abandon from under his blue coat.

"Why, there ain't no family — at least none but Muriel Jansen." His head cocked itself cautiously up the stairs. "She's his niece, and I reckon now everything here is hers. Her maid says as how she is clear bowled over. Only left her room once since — since it happened. And that was to tell me as how nothing was to be disturbed." Mr. Peddicord drew himself up with the suspicion of a frown. "Just as though an experienced officer wouldn't know *that* much!"

Madelyn glanced over her shoulder to the end of the hall. A hatchet-faced man in russet livery stood staring at us with wooden eyes.

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Mr. Peddicord shrugged.

"That's Peters, the butler. He's the chap what found Mr. Marsh."

I could feel the wooden eyes following us until a turn in the stairs blocked their range.

A red-glowing room — oppressively red. Scarlet-frescoed walls, deep red draperies, cherry-upholstered furniture, Turkish-red rugs, rows on rows of red-bound books. Above, a great, flat glass roof, open to the sky from corner to corner, through which the splash of the sun on the rich colors gave the weird semblance of a crimson pool almost in the room's exact center. Such was Wendell Marsh's library — as eccentrically designed as its master.

It was the wreck of a room that we found. Shattered vases littered the floor — books were ripped savagely apart — curtains were hanging in ribbons — a heavy leather rocker was splintered.

The wreckage might have marked the death-struggle of giants. In the midst of the destruction, Wendell Marsh was twisted on his back. His face was shriveled, his eyes were staring. There was no hint of a wound or even a bruise. In his right hand was gripped an object partially turned from me.

I found myself stepping nearer, as though drawn by a magnet. There is something hypnotic in such

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horrible scenes! And then I barely checked a cry.

Wendell Marsh's dead fingers held a pipe — a strangely carved, red sandstone bowl, and a long, glistening stem.

Sheriff Peddicord noted the direction of my glance.

"Mr. Marsh got that there pipe in London, along with those other relics he brought home. They do say as how it was the first pipe ever smoked by a white man. The Indians of Virginia gave it to a chap named Sir Walter Raleigh. Mr. Marsh had a new stem put to it, and his butler says he smoked it every day. Queer, ain't it, how some folks' tastes do run?"

The sheriff moistened his lips under his scraggly yellow moustache.

"Must have been some fight what done this!" His head included the wrecked room in a vague sweep.

Madelyn strolled over to a pair of the ribboned curtains, and fingered them musingly.

"But that isn't the queerest part." The chief glanced at Madelyn expectantly. "There was no way for any one else to get out — or in!"

Madelyn stooped lower over the curtains. They seemed to fascinate her. "The door?" she hazarded absently. "It was locked?"

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"From the inside. Peters and the footman saw the key when they broke in this morning. . . . Peters swears he heard Mr. Marsh turn it when he left him writing at ten o'clock last night."

"The windows?"

"Fastened as tight as a drum — and, if they wasn't, it's a matter of a good thirty foot to the ground."

"The roof, perhaps?"

"A cat *might* get through it — if every part wasn't clamped as tight as the windows."

Mr. Peddicord spoke with a distinct inflection of triumph. Madelyn was still staring at the curtains.

"Isn't it rather odd," I ventured, "that the sounds of the struggle, or whatever it was, didn't alarm the house?"

Sheriff Peddicord plainly regarded me as an outsider. He answered my question with obvious shortness.

"You could fire a blunderbuss up here and no one would be the wiser. They say as how Mr. Marsh had the room made sound-proof. And, besides, the servants have a building to themselves, all except Miss Jansen's maid, who sleeps in a room next to her at the other end of the house."

My eyes circled back to Wendell Marsh's knotted figure — his shriveled face — horror-frozen eyes — the hand gripped about the fantastic pipe. I think

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it was the pipe that held my glance. Of all incongruities, a pipe in the hand of a dead man!

Maybe it was something of the same thought that brought Madelyn of a sudden across the room. She stooped, straightened the cold fingers, and rose with the pipe in her hand.

A new stem had obviously been added to it, of a substance which I judged to be jessamine. At its end, teeth-marks had bitten nearly through. The stone bowl was filled with the cold ashes of half-consumed tobacco. Madelyn balanced it musingly.

"Curious, isn't it, Sheriff, that a man engaged in a life-or-death struggle should cling to a heavy pipe?"

"Why — I suppose so. But the question, Miss Mack, is what became of that there other man? It isn't natural as how Mr. Marsh could have fought with himself."

"The other man?" Madelyn repeated mechanically. She was stirring the rim of the dead ashes.

"And how in tarnation was Mr. Marsh killed?"

Madelyn contemplated a dust-covered finger.

"Will you do me a favor, Sheriff?"

"Why, er — of course."

"Kindly find out from the butler if Mr. Marsh had cherry pie for dinner last night!"

The sheriff gulped.

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"Che-cherry pie?"

Madelyn glanced up impatiently.

"I believe he was very fond of it."

The sheriff shuffled across to the door uncertainly. Madelyn's eyes flashed to me.

"You might go, too, Nora."

For a moment I was tempted to flat rebellion. But Madelyn affected not to notice the fact. She is always so aggravatingly sure of her own way! — With what I tried to make a mood of aggrieved silence, I followed the sheriff's blue-coated figure. As the door closed, I saw that Madelyn was still balancing Raleigh's pipe.

From the top of the stairs, Sheriff Peddicord glanced across at me suspiciously.

"I say, what I would like to know is what became of that there other man!"

IV

A WISP of a black-gowned figure, peering through a dormer window at the end of the second-floor hall, turned suddenly as we reached the landing. A white, drawn face, suggesting a tired child, stared at us from under a frame of dull-gold hair, drawn low from a careless part. I knew at once it was Muriel Jansen, for the time, at least, mistress of the house of death.

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"Has the coroner come yet, Sheriff?"

She spoke with one of the most liquid voices I have ever heard. Had it not been for her bronze hair, I would have fancied her at once of Latin descent. The fact of my presence she seemed scarcely to notice, not with any suggestion of aloofness, but rather as though she had been drained even of the emotion of curiosity.

"Not yet, Miss Jansen. He should be here now."

She stepped closer to the window, and then turned slightly.

"I told Peters to telegraph to New York for Dr. Dench when he summoned you. He was one of Uncle's oldest friends. I — I would like him to be here when — when the coroner makes his examination."

The sheriff bowed awkwardly.

"Miss Mack is up-stairs now."

The pale face was staring at us again with raised eyebrows.

"Miss Mack? I don't understand." Her eyes shifted to me.

"She had a letter from Mr. Marsh by this morning's early post," I explained. "I am Miss Noraker. Mr. Marsh wanted her to come down at once. She didn't know, of course — couldn't know — that — that he was — dead!"

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"A letter from — Uncle?" A puzzled line gathered in her face.

I nodded.

"A distinctly curious letter. But — Miss Mack would perhaps prefer to give you the details."

The puzzled line deepened. I could feel her eyes searching mine intently.

"I presume Miss Mack will be down soon," I volunteered. "If you wish, however, I will tell her —"

"That will hardly be necessary. But — you are quite sure — a letter?"

"Quite sure," I returned, somewhat impatiently.

And then, without warning, her hands darted to her head, and she swayed forward. I caught her in my arms with a side-view of Sheriff Peddicord staring, open-mouthed.

"Get her maid!" I gasped.

The sheriff roused into belated action. As he took a cumbersome step toward the nearest door, it opened suddenly. A gaunt, middle-aged woman, in a crisp white apron, digested the situation with cold, grey eyes. Without a word, she caught Muriel Jansen in her arms.

"She has fainted," I said rather vaguely. "Can I help you?"

The other paused with her burden.

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"When I need you, I'll ask you!" she snapped, and banged the door in our faces.

In the wake of Sheriff Peddicord, I descended the stairs. A dozen question-marks were spinning through my brain. Why had Muriel Jansen fainted? Why had the mention of Wendell Marsh's letter left such an atmosphere of bewildered doubt? Why had the dragon-like maid — for such I divined her to be — faced us with such hostility? The undercurrent of hidden secrets in the dim, silent house seemed suddenly intensified.

With a vague wish for fresh air and the sun on the grass, I sought the front veranda, leaving the sheriff in the hall, mopping his face with his red handkerchief.

A carefully tended yard of generous distances stretched an inviting expanse of graded lawn before me. Evidently Wendell Marsh had provided a discreet distance between himself and his neighbors. The advance guard of a morbid crowd was already shuffling about the gate. I knew that it would not be long, too, before the press-siege would begin.

I could picture frantic city editors pitchforking their star men New Jerseyward. I smiled at the thought. The *Bugle*, the slave-driver that presided over my own financial destinies, — was assured of a generous "beat" in advance. The next train from New York was not due until late afternoon.

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From the staring line about the gate, the figure of a well-set-up young man in blue serge detached itself with swinging step.

"A reporter?" I breathed, incredulous.

With a glance at me, he ascended the steps, and paused at the door, awaiting an answer to his bell. My stealthy glances failed to place him among the "stars" of New York newspaperdom. Perhaps he was a local correspondent. With smug expectancy, I awaited his discomfiture when Peters received his card. And then I rubbed my eyes. Peters was stepping back from the door, and the other was following him with every suggestion of assurance.

I was still gasping when a maid, broom in hand, zigzagged toward my end of the veranda. She smiled at me with a pair of friendly black eyes.

"Are you a detective?"

"Why?" I parried.

She drew her broom idly across the floor.

"I — I always thought detectives different from other people."

She sent a rivulet of dust through the railing, with a side glance still in my direction.

"Oh, you will find them human enough," I laughed, "outside of detective stories!"

She pondered my reply doubtfully.

"I thought it about time Mr. Truxton was appearing!" she ventured suddenly.

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"Mr. Truxton?"

"He's the man that just came — Mr. Homer Truxton. Miss Jansen is going to marry him!"

A light broke through my fog.

"Then he is not a reporter?"

"Mr. Truxton? He's a lawyer." The broom continued its dilatory course. "Mr. Marsh didn't like him — so they *say!*"

I stepped back, smoothing my skirts. I have learned the cardinal rule of Madelyn never to pretend too great an interest in the gossip of a servant.

The maid was mechanically shaking out a rug.

"For my part, I always thought Mr. Truxton far and away the pick of Miss Jansen's two steadies. I never could understand what she could see in Dr. Dench! Why, he's old enough to be her —"

In the doorway, Sheriff Peddicord's bulky figure beckoned.

"Don't you reckon as how it's about time we were going back to Miss Mack?" he whispered.

"Perhaps," I assented rather reluctantly.

From the shadows of the hall, the sheriff's sound eye fixed itself on me belligerently.

"I say, what I would like to know is what became of that there other man!"

As we paused on the second landing the well-set-up figure of Mr. Homer Truxton was bending toward a partially opened door. Beyond his

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shoulder, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a pale face under a border of rumpled dull-gold hair. Evidently Muriel Jansen had recovered from her faint.

The door closed abruptly, but not before I had seen that her eyes were red with weeping.

Madelyn was sunk into a red-backed chair before a huge, flat-top desk in the corner of the library, a stack of Wendell Marsh's red-bound books, from a wheel-cabinet at her side, bulked before her. She finished the page she was reading — a page marked with a broad blue pencil — without a hint that she had heard us enter.

Sheriff Peddicord stared across at her with a disappointment that was almost ludicrous. Evidently Madelyn was falling short of his conception of the approved attitudes for a celebrated detective!

"Are you a student of Elizabethan literature, Sheriff?" she asked suddenly.

The sheriff gurgled weakly.

"If you are, I am quite sure you will be interested in Mr. Marsh's collection. It is the most thorough on the subject that I have ever seen. For instance, here is a volume on the inner court life of Elizabeth — perhaps you would like me to read you this random passage?"

The sheriff drew himself up with more dignity than I thought he possessed.

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"We are investigating a crime, Miss Mack!"

Madelyn closed the book with a sigh.

"So we are! May I ask what is your report from the butler?"

"Mr. Marsh did *not* have cherry pie for dinner last night!" the sheriff snapped.

"You are quite confident?"

And then abruptly the purport of the question flashed to me.

"Why, Mr. Marsh, himself, mentioned the fact in his letter!" I burst out.

Madelyn's eyes turned to me reprovingly.

"You must be mistaken, Nora."

With a lingering glance at the books on the desk, she rose. Sheriff Peddicord moved toward the door, opened it, and faced about with an abrupt clearing of his throat.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Mack, have — have you found any *clues* in the case?"

Madelyn had paused again at the ribboned curtains.

"Clues? The man who made Mr. Marsh's death possible, Sheriff, was an expert chemist, of Italian origin, living for some time in London — and he died three hundred years ago!"

From the hall we had a fleeting view of Sheriff Peddicord's face, flushed as red as his handkerchief, and then it and the handkerchief disappeared.

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I whirled on Madelyn sternly.

"You are carrying your absurd joke, Miss Mack, altogether too —"

I paused, gulping in my turn. It was as though I had stumbled from the shadows into an electric glare.

Madelyn had crossed to the desk, and was gently shifting the dead ashes of Raleigh's pipe into an envelope. A moment she sniffed at its bowl, peering down at the crumpled body at her feet.

"The pipe!" I gasped. "Wendell Marsh was poisoned with the pipe!"

Madelyn sealed the envelope slowly.

"Is that fact just dawning on you, Nora?"

"But the rest of it — what you told the —"

Madelyn thrummed on the bulky volume of Elizabethan history.

"Some day, Nora, if you will remind me, I will give you the material for what you call a Sunday 'feature' on the historic side of murder as a fine art!"

V

In a curtain-shadowed nook of the side veranda Muriel Jansen was awaiting us, pillowed back against a bronze-draped chair, whose colors almost startlingly matched the gold of her hair. Her re-

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semblance to a tired child was even more pronounced than when I had last seen her.

I found myself glancing furtively for signs of Homer Truxton, but he had disappeared.

Miss Jansen took the initiative in our interview with a nervous abruptness, contrasting oddly with her hesitancy at our last meeting.

"I understand, Miss Mack, that you received a letter from my uncle asking your presence here. May I see it?"

The eagerness of her tones could not be mistaken.

From her wrist-bag Madelyn extended the square envelope of the morning post, with its remarkable message. Twice Muriel Jansen's eyes swept slowly through its contents. Madelyn watched her with a little frown. A sudden tenseness had crept into the air, as though we were all keying ourselves for an unexpected climax. And then, like a thunder-clap, it came.

"A curious communication," Madelyn suggested. "I had hoped you might be able to add to it?"

The tired face in the bronze-draped chair stared across the lawn.

"I can. The most curious fact of your communication, Miss Mack, is that *Wendell Marsh did not write it!*"

Never have I admired more keenly Madelyn's remarkable poise. Save for an almost impercepti-

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ble indrawing of her breath, she gave no hint of the shock which must have stunned her as it did me. I was staring with mouth agape. But, then, I presume you have discovered by this time that I was not designed for a detective!

Strangely enough, Muriel Jansen gave no trace of wonder in her announcement. Her attitude suggested a sense of detachment from the subject as though suddenly it had lost its interest. And yet, less than an hour ago, it had prostrated her in a swoon.

"You mean the letter is a forgery?" asked Madelyn quietly.

"Quite obviously."

"And the attempts on Mr. Marsh's life to which it refers?"

"There have been none. I have been with my uncle continuously for six months. I can speak definitely."

Miss Jansen fumbled in a white-crocheted bag.

"Here are several specimens of Mr. Marsh's writing. I think they should be sufficient to convince you of what I say. If you desire others —"

I was gulping like a truant school-girl as Madelyn spread on her lap the three notes extended to her. Casual business and personal references they were, none of more than half a dozen lines. Quite enough, however, to complete the sudden chasm at

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our feet — quite enough to emphasize a bold, aggressive penmanship, almost perpendicular, without the slightest resemblance to the cramped, shadowy writing of the morning's astonishing communication.

Madelyn rose from her chair, smoothing her skirts thoughtfully. For a moment she stood at the railing, gazing down upon a trellis of yellow roses, her face turned from us. For the first time in our curious friendship, I was actually conscious of a feeling of pity for her! The blank wall which she faced seemed so abrupt — so final!

Muriel Jansen shifted her position slightly.

"Are you satisfied, Miss Mack?"

"Quite." Madelyn turned, and handed back the three notes. "I presume this means that you do not care for me to continue the case?"

I whirled in dismay. I had never thought of this possibility.

"On the contrary, Miss Mack, it seems to me an additional reason why you should continue!"

I breathed freely again. At least we were not to be dismissed with the abruptness that Miss Jansen's maid had shown! Madelyn bowed rather absently.

"Then if you will give me another interview, perhaps this afternoon —"

Miss Jansen fumbled with the lock of her bag.

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For the first time her voice lost something of its directness.

"Have — have you any explanation of this astonishing — forgery?"

Madelyn was staring out toward the increasing crowd at the gate. A sudden ripple had swept through it.

"Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Orlando Julio, Miss Jansen?"

My own eyes, following the direction of Madelyn's gaze, were brought back sharply to the veranda. For the second time, Muriel Jansen had crumpled back in a faint.

As I darted toward the servants' bell Madelyn checked me. Striding up the walk were two men with the unmistakable air of physicians. At Madelyn's motioning hand they turned toward us.

The foremost of the two quickened his pace as he caught sight of the figure in the chair. Instinctively I knew that he was Dr. Dench — and it needed no profound analysis to place his companion as the local coroner.

With a deft hand on Miss Jansen's heart-beats, Dr. Dench raised a ruddy, brown-whiskered face inquiringly toward us.

"Shock!" Madelyn explained. "Is it serious?"

The hand on the wavering breast darted toward a medicine case, and selected a vial of brownish

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liquid. The gaze above it continued its scrutiny of Madelyn's slender figure.

Dr. Dench was of the rugged, German type, steel-eyed, confidently sure of movement, with the physique of a splendidly muscled animal. If the servant's tattle was to be credited, Muriel Jansen could not have attracted more opposite extremes in her suitors.

The coroner — a rusty-suited man of middle age, in quite obvious professional awe of his companion — extended a glass of water. Miss Jansen wearily opened her eyes before it reached her lips.

Dr. Dench restrained her sudden effort to rise.

"Drink this, please!" There was nothing but professional command in his voice. If he loved the grey-pallored girl in the chair, his emotions were under superb control.

Madelyn stepped to the background, motioning me quietly.

"I fancy I can leave now safely. I am going back to town."

"Town?" I echoed.

"I should be back the latter part of the afternoon. Would it inconvenience you to wait here?"

"But, why on earth —" I began.

"Will you tell the butler to send around the car? Thanks!"

When Madelyn doesn't choose to answer ques-

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tions she ignores them. I subsided as gracefully as possible. As her machine whirled under the porte-cochere, however, my curiosity again overflowed my restraint.

"At least, who is Orlando Julio?" I demanded.

Madelyn carefully adjusted her veil.

"The man who provided the means for the death of Wendell Marsh!" And she was gone.

I swept another glance at the trio on the side veranda, and with what I tried to convince myself was a philosophical shrug, although I knew perfectly well it was merely a pettish fling, sought a retired corner of the rear drawing room, with my pad and pencil.

After all, I was a newspaper woman, and it needed no elastic imagination to picture the scene in the city room of the *Bugle,* if I failed to send a proper accounting of myself.

A few minutes later a tread of feet, advancing to the stairs, told me that the coroner and Dr. Dench were ascending for the belated examination of Wendell Marsh's body. Miss Jansen had evidently recovered, or been assigned to the ministrations of her maid. Once Peters, the wooden-faced butler, entered ghostily to inform me that luncheon would be served at one, but effaced himself almost before my glance returned to my writing.

I partook of the meal in the distinguished com-

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pany of Sheriff Peddicord. Apparently Dr. Dench was still busied in his grewsome task up-stairs, and it was not surprising that Miss Jansen preferred her own apartments.

However much the sheriff's professional poise might have been jarred by the events of the morning, his appetite had not been affected. His attention was too absorbed in the effort to do justice to the Marsh hospitality to waste time in table talk.

He finished his last spoonful of strawberry ice-cream with a heavy sigh of contentment, removed the napkin, which he had tucked under his collar, and, as though mindful of the family's laundry bills, folded it carefully and wiped his lips with his red handkerchief. It was not until then that our silence was interrupted.

Glancing cautiously about the room, and observing that the butler had been called kitchenward, to my amazement he essayed a confidential wink.

"I say," he ventured enticingly, leaning his elbow on the table, "what I would like to know is what became of that there other man!"

"Are you familiar with the Fourth Dimension, Sheriff?" I returned solemnly. I rose from my chair, and stepped toward him confidentially in my turn. "I believe that a thorough study of that subject would answer your question."

It was three o'clock when I stretched myself in

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my corner of the drawing-room, and stuffed the last sheets of my copy paper into a special-delivery-stamped envelope.

My story was done. And Madelyn was not there to blue-pencil the Park Row adjectives! I smiled rather gleefully as I patted my hair, and leisurely addressed the envelope. The city editor would be satisfied, if Madelyn wasn't!

As I stepped into the hall, Dr. Dench, the coroner, and Sheriff Peddicord were descending the stairs. Evidently the medical examination had been completed. Under other circumstances the three expressions before me would have afforded an interesting study in contrasts — Dr. Dench trimming his nails with professional stoicism, the coroner endeavoring desperately to copy the other's *sang froid*, and the sheriff buried in an owl-like solemnity.

Dr. Dench restored his knife to his pocket.

"You are Miss Mack's assistant, I understand?"

I bowed.

"Miss Mack has been called away. She should be back, however, shortly."

I could feel the doctor's appraising glance dissecting me with much the deliberateness of a surgical operation. I raised my eyes suddenly, and returned his stare. It was a virile, masterful face — and, I had to admit, coldly handsome!

Dr. Dench snapped open his watch.

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"Very well then, Miss, Miss —"

"Noraker!" I supplied crisply.

The blond beard inclined the fraction of an inch.

"We will wait."

"The autopsy?" I ventured. "Has it —"

"The result of the autopsy I will explain to — Miss Mack!"

I bit my lip, felt my face flush as I saw that Sheriff Peddicord was trying to smother a grin, and turned with a rather unsuccessful shrug.

Now, if I had been of a vindictive nature, I would have opened my envelope and inserted a retaliating paragraph that would have returned the snub of Dr. Dench with interest. I flatter myself that I consigned the envelope to the Three Forks post-office, in the rear of the Elite Dry Goods Emporium, with its contents unchanged.

As a part recompense, I paused at a corner drug store, and permitted a young man with a gorgeous pink shirt to make me a chocolate ice-cream soda. I was bent over an asthmatic straw when, through the window, I saw Madelyn's car skirt the curb.

I rushed out to the sidewalk, while the young man stared dazedly after me. The chauffeur swerved the machine as I tossed a dime to the Adonis of the fountain.

Madelyn shifted to the end of the seat as I clambered to her side. One glance was quite enough to

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show that her town-mission, whatever it was, had ended in failure. Perhaps it was the consciousness of this fact that brought my eyes next to her blue turquoise locket. It was open. I glared accusingly.

"So you have fallen back on the cola stimulant again, Miss Mack?"

She nodded glumly, and perversely slipped into her mouth another of the dark, brown berries, on which I have known her to keep up for forty-eight hours without sleep, and almost without food.

For a moment I forgot even my curiosity as to her errand.

"I wish the duty would be raised so high you couldn't get those things into the country!"

She closed her locket, without deigning a response. The more volcanic my outburst, the more glacial Madelyn's coldness — particularly on the cola topic. I shrugged in resignation. I might as well have done so in the first place!

I straightened my hat, drew my handkerchief over my flushed face, and coughed questioningly. Continued silence. I turned in desperation.

"Well?" I surrendered.

"Don't you know enough, Nora Noraker, to hold your tongue?"

My pent-up emotions snapped.

"Look here, Miss Mack, I have been snubbed by Dr. Dench and the coroner, grinned at by Sheriff

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Peddicord, and I am not going to be crushed by you! What is your report, — good, bad, or indifferent?"

Madelyn turned from her stare into the dust-yellow road.

"I have been a fool, Nora — a blind, bigoted, self-important fool!"

I drew a deep breath.

"Which means — "

From her bag Madelyn drew the envelope of dead tobacco ashes from the Marsh library, and tossed it over the side of the car. I sank back against the cushions.

"Then the tobacco after all — "

"Is nothing but tobacco — harmless tobacco!"

"But the pipe — I thought the pipe — "

"That's just it! The pipe, my dear girl, killed Wendell Marsh! But I don't know how! *I don't know how!*"

"Madelyn," I said severely, "you are a woman, even if you are making your living at a man's profession! What you need is a good cry!"

VI

Dr. Dench, pacing back and forth across the veranda, knocked the ashes from an amber-stemmed meerschaum, and advanced to meet us as we

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alighted. The coroner and Sheriff Peddicord were craning their necks from wicker chairs in the background. It was easy enough to surmise that Dr. Dench had parted from them abruptly in the desire for a quiet smoke to marshall his thoughts.

"Fill your pipe again if you wish," said Madelyn. "I don't mind."

Dr. Dench inclined his head, and dug the mouth of his meerschaum into a fat leather pouch. A spiral of blue smoke soon curled around his face. He was one of that type of men to whom a pipe lends a distinction of studious thoughtfulness.

With a slight gesture he beckoned in the direction of the coroner.

"It is proper, perhaps, that Dr. Williams in his official capacity should be heard first."

Through the smoke of his meerschaum, his eyes were searching Madelyn's face. It struck me that he was rather puzzled as to just how seriously to take her.

The coroner shuffled nervously. At his elbow, Sheriff Peddicord fumbled for his red handkerchief.

"We have made a thorough examination of Mr. Marsh's body, Miss Mack, a most thorough examination —"

"Of course he was not shot, nor stabbed, nor strangled, nor sand-bagged?" interrupted Madelyn crisply.

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The coroner glanced at Dr. Dench uncertainly. The latter was smoking with inscrutable face.

"Nor poisoned!" finished the coroner with a quick breath.

A blue smoke curl from Dr. Dench's meerschaum vanished against the sun. The coroner jingled a handful of coins in his pocket. The sound jarred on my nerves oddly. Not poisoned! Then Madelyn's theory of the pipe —

My glance swerved in her direction. Another blank wall — the blankest in this riddle of blank walls!

But the bewilderment I had expected in her face I did not find. The black dejection I had noticed in the car had dropped like a whisked-off cloak. The tired lines had been erased as by a sponge. Her eyes shone with that tense glint which I knew came only when she saw a befogged way swept clear before her.

"You mean that you *found* no trace of poison?" she corrected.

The coroner drew himself up.

"Under the supervision of Dr. Dench, we have made a most complete probe of the various organs, — lungs, stomach, heart —"

"And brain, I presume?"

"Brain? Certainly not!"

"And you?" Madelyn turned toward Dr.

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Dench. "You subscribe to Dr. Williams' opinion?"

Dr. Dench removed his meerschaum.

"From our examination of Mr. Marsh's body, I am prepared to state emphatically that there is no trace of toxic condition of any kind!"

"Am I to infer then that you will return a verdict of — natural death?"

Dr. Dench stirred his pipe-ashes.

"I was always under the impression, Miss Mack, that the verdict in a case of this kind must come from the coroner's jury."

Madelyn pinned back her veil, and removed her gloves.

"There is no objection to my seeing the body again?"

The coroner stared.

"Why, er — the undertaker has it now. I don't see why he should object, if you wish —"

Madelyn stepped to the door. Behind her, Sheriff Peddicord stirred suddenly.

"I say, what I would like to know, gents, is what became of that there other man!"

It was not until six o'clock that I saw Madelyn again, and then I found her in Wendell Marsh's red library. She was seated at its late tenant's huge desk. Before her were a vial of whitish-grey

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powder, a small, rubber, inked roller, a half a dozen sheets of paper, covered with what looked like smudges of black ink, and Raleigh's pipe. I stopped short, staring.

She rose with a shrug.

"Finger-prints," she explained laconically. "This sheet belongs to Miss Jansen; the next to her maid; the third to the butler, Peters; the fourth to Dr. Dench; the fifth to Wendell Marsh, himself. It was my first experiment in taking the 'prints' of a dead man. It was — interesting."

"But what has that to do with a case of this kind?" I demanded.

Madelyn picked up the sixth sheet of smudged paper.

"We have here the finger-prints of Wendell Marsh's murderer!"

I did not even cry my amazement. I suppose the kaleidoscope of the day had dulled my normal emotions. I remember that I readjusted a loose pin in my waist before I spoke.

"The murderer of Wendell Marsh!" I repeated mechanically. "Then he *was* poisoned?"

Madelyn's eyes opened and closed without answer.

I reached over to the desk, and picked up Mr. Marsh's letter of the morning post at Madelyn's elbow.

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"You have found the man who forged this?"

"It was *not* forged!"

In my daze I dropped the letter to the floor.

"You have discovered then the other man in the death-struggle that wrecked the library?"

"There was no other man!"

Madelyn gathered up her possessions from the desk. From the edge of the row of books she lifted a small, red-bound volume, perhaps four inches in width, and then with a second thought laid it back.

"By the way, Nora, I wish you would come back here at eight o'clock. If this book is still where I am leaving it, please bring it to me! I think that will be all for the present."

"All?" I gasped. "Do you realize that —"

Madelyn moved toward the door.

"I think eight o'clock will be late enough for your errand," she said without turning.

The late June twilight had deepened into a somber darkness when, my watch showing ten minutes past the hour of my instructions, I entered the room on the second floor that had been assigned to Miss Mack and myself. Madelyn at the window was staring into the shadow-blanketed yard.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Your book is no longer in the library!" I said crossly.

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Madelyn whirled with a smile.

"Good! And now if you will be so obliging as to tell Peters to ask Miss Jansen to meet me in the rear drawing-room, with any of the friends of the family she desires to be present, I think we can clear up our little puzzle."

VII

It was a curious group that the graceful Swiss clock in the bronze drawing-room of the Marsh house stared down upon as it ticked its way past the half hour after eight. With a grave, rather insistent bow, Miss Mack had seated the other occupants of the room as they answered her summons. She was the only one of us that remained standing.

Before her were Sheriff Peddicord, Homer Truxton, Dr. Dench, and Muriel Jansen. Madelyn's eyes swept our faces for a moment in silence, and then she crossed the room and closed the door.

"I have called you here," she began, "to explain the mystery of Mr. Marsh's death." Again her glance swept our faces. "In many respects it has provided us with a peculiar, almost an unique problem.

"We find a man, in apparently normal health, dead. The observer argues at once foul play; and yet on his body is no hint of wound or bruise. The

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medical examination discovers no trace of poison. The autopsy shows no evidence of crime. Apparently we have eliminated all forms of unnatural death.

"I have called you here because the finding of the autopsy is incorrect, or rather incomplete. We are not confronted by natural death — but by a crime. And I may say at the outset that I am not the only person to know this fact. My knowledge is shared by one other in this room."

Sheriff Peddicord rose to his feet and rather ostentatiously stepped to the door and stood with his back against it. Madelyn smiled faintly at the movement.

"I scarcely think there will be an effort at escape, Sheriff," she said quietly.

Muriel Jansen was crumpled back into her chair, staring. Dr. Dench was studying Miss Mack with the professional frown he might have directed at an abnormality on the operating table. It was Truxton who spoke first in the fashion of the impulsive boy.

"If we are not dealing with natural death, how on earth then was Mr. Marsh killed?"

Madelyn whisked aside a light covering from a stand at her side, and raised to view Raleigh's red sand-stone pipe. For a moment she balanced it musingly.

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"The three-hundred-year-old death tool of Orlando Julio," she explained. "It was this that killed Wendell Marsh!"

She pressed the bowl of the pipe into the palm of her hand. "As an instrument of death, it is *almost* beyond detection. We examined the ashes, and found nothing but harmless tobacco. The organs of the victim showed no trace of foul play."

She tapped the long stem gravely.

"But the examination of the organs did *not* include the brain. And it is through the brain that the pipe strikes, killing first the mind in a nightmare of insanity, and then the body. That accounts for the wreckage that we found — the evidences apparently of *two* men engaged in a desperate struggle. The wreckage was the work of only one man — a maniac in the moment before death. The drug with which we are dealing drives its victim into an insane fury before his body succumbs. I believe such cases are fairly common in India."

"Then Mr. Marsh was poisoned after all?" cried Truxton. He was the only one of Miss Mack's auditors to speak.

"No, not poisoned! You will understand as I proceed. The pipe, you will find, contains apparently but one bowl and one channel, and at a superficial glance is filled only with tobacco. In reality,

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there is a lower chamber concealed beneath the upper bowl, to which extends a second channel. This secret chamber is charged with a certain compound of Indian hemp and dhatura leaves, one of the most powerful brain stimulants known to science — and one of the most dangerous if used above a certain strength. From the lower chamber it would leave no trace, of course, in the ashes above.

"Between the two compartments of the pipe is a slight connecting opening, sufficient to allow the hemp beneath to be ignited gradually by the burning tobacco. When a small quantity of the compound is used, the smoker is stimulated as by no other drug, not even opium. Increase the quantity above the danger point, and mark the result. The victim is not poisoned in the strict sense of the word, but literally *smothered to death by the fumes!*"

In Miss Mack's voice was the throb of the student before the creation of the master.

"I should like this pipe, Miss Jansen, if you ever care to dispose of it!"

The girl was still staring woodenly.

"It was Orlando Julio, the medieval poisoner," she gasped, "that Uncle described —"

"In his seventeenth chapter of 'The World's Great Cynics,'" finished Madelyn. "I have taken the liberty of reading the chapter in manuscript

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form. Julio, however, was not the discoverer of the drug. He merely introduced it to the English public. As a matter of fact, it is one of the oldest stimulants of the East. It is easy to assume that it was not as a stimulant that Julio used it, but as a baffling instrument of murder. The mechanism of the pipe was his own invention, of course. The smoker, if not in the secret, would be completely oblivious to his danger. He might even use the pipe in perfect safety — until its lower chamber was loaded!"

Sheriff Peddicord, against the door, mopped his face with his red handkerchief, like a man in a daze. Dr. Dench was still studying Miss Mack with his intent frown. Madelyn swerved her angle abruptly.

"Last night was not the first time the hemp-chamber of Wendell Marsh's pipe had been charged. We can trace the effect of the drug on his brain for several months — hallucinations, imaginative enemies seeking his life, incipient insanity. That explains his astonishing letter to me. Wendell Marsh was not a man of nine lives, but only one. The perils which he described were merely fantastic figments of the drug. For instance, the episode of the poisoned cherry pie. There was no pie at all served at the table yesterday.

"The letter to me was not a forgery, Miss Jansen, although you were sincere enough when you

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pronounced it such. The complete change in your uncle's handwriting was only another effect of the drug. It was this fact, in the end, which led me to the truth. You did not perceive that the dates of your notes and mine were *six months apart!* I knew that some terrific mental shock *must* have occurred in the meantime.

"And then, too, the ravages of a drug-crazed victim were at once suggested by the curtains of the library. They were not simply torn, but fairly *chewed* to pieces!"

A sudden tension fell over the room. We shifted nervously, rather avoiding one another's eyes. Madelyn laid the pipe back on the stand. She was quite evidently in no hurry to continue. It was Truxton again who put the leading question of the moment.

"If Mr. Marsh was killed as you describe, Miss Mack, *who* killed him?"

Madelyn glanced across at Dr. Dench.

"Will you kindly let me have the red leather book that you took from Mr. Marsh's desk this evening, Doctor?"

The physician met her glance steadily.

"You think it — necessary?"

"I am afraid I must insist."

For an instant Dr. Dench hesitated. Then, with a shrug, he reached into a coat-pocket and extended

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the red-bound volume, for which Miss Mack had dispatched me on the fruitless errand to the library. As Madelyn opened it we saw that it was not a printed volume, but filled with several hundred pages of close, cramped writing. Dr. Dench's gaze swerved to Muriel Jansen as Miss Mack spoke.

"I have here the diary of Wendell Marsh, which shows us that he had been in the habit of seeking the stimulant of Indian hemp, or 'hasheesh' for some time, possibly as a result of his retired, sedentary life and his close application to his books. Until his purchase of the Bainford relics, however, he had taken the stimulant in the comparatively harmless form of powdered leaves or 'bhang,' as it is termed in the Orient. His acquisition of Julio's drug-pipe, and an accidental discovery of its mechanism, led him to adopt the compound of hemp and dhatura, prepared for smoking — in India called 'charas.' No less an authority than Captain E. N. Windsor, bacteriologist of the Burmese government, states that it is directly responsible for a large percentage of the lunacy of the Orient. Wendell Marsh, however, did not realize his danger, nor how much stronger the latter compound is than the form of the drug to which he had been accustomed.

"Dr. Dench endeavored desperately to warn him of his peril, and free him from the bondage of the

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habit as the diary records, but the victim was too thoroughly enslaved. In fact, the situation had reached a point just before the final climax when it could no longer be concealed. The truth was already being suspected by the older servants. I assume this was why you feared my investigations in the case, Miss Jansen."

Muriel Jansen was staring at Madelyn in a sort of dumb appeal.

"I can understand and admire Dr. Dench's efforts to conceal the fact from the public — first, in his supervision of the inquest, which might have stumbled on the truth, and then in his removal of the betraying diary, which I left purposely exposed in the hope that it might inspire such an action. Had it *not* been removed, I might have suspected another explanation of the case — in spite of certain evidence to the contrary!"

Dr. Dench's face had gone white.

"God! Miss Mack, do you mean that after all it was not suicide?"

"It was not suicide," said Madelyn quietly. She stepped across toward the opposite door.

"When I stated that my knowledge that we are not dealing with natural death was shared by another person in this room, I might have added that it was shared by still a third person — ***not in the room!***"

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With a sudden movement she threw open the door before her. From the adjoining ante-room lurched the figure of Peters, the butler. He stared at us with a face grey with terror, and then crumpled to his knees. Madelyn drew away sharply as he tried to catch her skirts.

"You may arrest the murderer of Wendell Marsh, Sheriff!" she said gravely. "And I think perhaps you had better take him outside."

She faced our bewildered stares as the drawing-room door closed behind Mr. Peddicord and his prisoner. From her stand she again took Raleigh's sand-stone pipe, and with it two sheets of paper, smudged with the prints of a human thumb and fingers.

"It was the pipe in the end which led me to the truth, not only as to the method but the identity of the assassin," she explained. "The hand, which placed the fatal charge in the concealed chamber, left its imprint on the surface of the bowl. The fingers, grimed with the dust of the drug, made an impression which I would have at once detected had I not been so occupied with what I might find *inside* that I forgot what I might find *outside!* I am very much afraid that I permitted myself the great blunder of the modern detective — lack of thoroughness.

"Comparison with the finger-prints of the vari-

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ous agents in the case, of course, made the next step a mere detail of mathematical comparison. To make my identity sure, I found that my suspect possessed not only the opportunity and the knowledge for the crime, but the motive.

"In his younger days Peters was a chemist's apprentice; a fact which he utilized in his master's behalf in obtaining the drugs which had become so necessary a part of Mr. Marsh's life. Had Wendell Marsh appeared in person for so continuous a supply, his identity would soon have made the fact a matter of common gossip. He relied on his servant for his agent, a detail which he mentions several times in his diary, promising Peters a generous bequest in his will as a reward. I fancy that it was the dream of this bequest, which would have meant a small fortune to a man in his position, that set the butler's brain to work on his treacherous plan of murder."

Miss Mack's dull gold hair covered the shoulders of her white *peignoir* in a great, thick braid. She was propped in a nest of pillows, with her favorite romance, "The Three Musketeers," open at the historic siege of Porthos in the wine cellar. We had elected to spend the night at the Marsh house.

Madelyn glanced up as I appeared in the doorway of our room.

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"Allow me to present a problem to your analytical skill, Miss Mack," I said humbly. "Which man does your knowledge of feminine psychology say Muriel Jansen will reward — the gravely protecting physician, or the boyishly admiring Truxton?"

"If she were thirty," retorted Madelyn, yawning, "she would be wise enough to choose Dr. Dench. But, as she is only twenty-two, it will be Truxton."

With a sigh, she turned again to the swashbuckling exploits of the gallant Porthos.

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II

THE MISSING BRIDEGROOM

I

Two million dollars and the most beautiful girl in the county were to be Norris Endicott's in another twenty-five minutes.

He was emphatically in love with Bertha Van Sutton, but cared nothing for her millions, in spite of the remembrance of his own uncertain income as a struggling architect. The next half hour was to bring him all that a reasonable man could ask in this uncertain world.

This was his position and outlook at the Van Sutton home at seven-forty P. M. Some one has said that a moment can change the course of a battle. Also it can revolutionize a man's life — perhaps end it altogether — and pitchfork him into another. At five minutes past eight — the hour that Endicott was to have made Bertha Van Sutton his wife — he had vanished from "The Maples"

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as completely and mysteriously as though the balmy earth outside had opened and swallowed him. The expectant bridegroom literally had been whisked into oblivion.

At twenty minutes before eight o'clock, Willard White, glancing into his room, found Endicott pacing the floor, his tall, closely knit figure showing to excellent advantage in his evening clothes, a quiet smile, as of anticipation, on his face as he held a match to his cigarette.

"Nervous, old man?" White called banteringly, holding the door a-jar.

Endicott turned with a laugh. "Nervous? When the best girl in the world is about to be mine — all mine? Of course I'm nervous, but it's because I am so happy I can hardly keep my feet on the ground!" (Which was a somewhat hysterical, but thoroughly human remark, you would agree, had you ever worshipped at the shrine of Bertha Van Sutton!)

At five minutes past eight the orchestra shifted the music of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" to their racks, the leader cleared his throat in expectation of the signal to raise his baton, and the chattering throngs of guests, scattered through the lavishly decorated house from the conservatory to the veranda, swept into the long red-and-gold drawing-room, with the bower of palms and orchids

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at the end drawing admiring exclamations even from the most cynical dowagers. Adolph Van Sutton's millions assuredly had set a fit stage for the most talked-of wedding of the season.

Outside, Adolph, himself, was fumbling nervously with his cuffs as the bridal party ranged itself in whispering ranks for the entry. Bertha Van Sutton had just appeared with Ethel Allison, her chief bridesmaid and chum since boarding-school days. As she took the arm of her father, she made a picture to justify the half-audible sighs of envy from the bevy of attendants. With the folds of her long veil reaching almost to the hem of her gown and the sweep of her train, her figure looked almost regal in spite of her girlish slenderness. Her dark hair, piled in a great, loose coil, heightened the impression, which might have given her the suggestion of haughtiness had it not been for the magnetism of her smile.

The smile was bubbling in her eyes as she glanced around with the surprised question, "Where's Norris?"

Her father looked up quickly, but it was Ethel Allison who answered, "Willard White has just gone after him, Bert. Here he comes now!"

The best man came hurriedly through the door. As he paused, he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

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"Where's Norris, Willard?" Miss Allison asked impatiently.

"He's gone!"

"Gone!" The bridesmaid's voice rose to a shrill falsetto.

The best man shook his head in a sort of blind bewilderment. "He's gone," he repeated, mechanically.

The bride whirled. Adolph Van Sutton strode forward and seized White by the arm.

"What, under Heaven, are you giving us, man?"

White stiffened his shoulders as though the sharp grasp had awakened him from his daze.

"Norris Endicott is not in this house, sir!" he cried, as if realizing for the first time the full import of his announcement.

In the drawing-room, the orchestra-leader, with a final look at the empty door, lowered his baton with a snort of disgust and plumped sullenly back in his chair. The jewel-studded ranks of the crowding guests elevated their eyebrows in polite wonder. In the corner, the palms that were to have sheltered the bride beckoned impatiently.

On the velvet carpet, outside, lay a white, silent figure. It was Bertha Van Sutton who had fallen, an unconscious heap in the folds of her wedding finery.

Up-stairs in the groom's apartment, a circle of

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disheveled men were staring at one another in tongue-tied bewilderment. Norris Endicott might have vanished into thin air, evaporated. The man who was to wed the Van Sutton heiress had been blotted out, eliminated.

As the group edged uneasily toward the door, a stray breeze, fragrant with the evening odors of the flower-lined lawn below, swept through the open window. A small object, half-buried in the curtain folds, fell with a soft thud to the floor. The nearest man stooped toward it almost unconsciously. It was a silver ball, perhaps three-quarters of an inch in diameter. With a shrug, he passed it to Adolph Van Sutton. The latter dropped it mechanically into his pocket.

II

THE five o'clock sun was splashing its waning glow down on to the autumn-thinned trees when I pushed open the rustic gate of "The Rosary" the next afternoon to carry the somber problem that was beyond me to the wizard skill of Madelyn Mack.

I was frankly tired after the day's buffetings. And there was a soothing restfulness in the velvet green of the close-cropped lawn, with its fat box hedges and the scarlet splashes of its canna beds,

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that brought me to an almost involuntary pause lest I break the spell. Madelyn Mack's rose garden beyond was a wreck of shrivelled bushes, but my pang at the memory of its faded glories was softened by the banks of asters and cosmos marshalled before it as though to hide its emptiness. The snake-like coil of a black hose was pouring a playful spray into a circle of scarlet sage at the side of the gravelled path, with the gaunt figure of Andrew Bolton crouching, hatless, near it, trimming a ragged line of grass with a pair of long shears.

With a sigh I turned toward the quaint chalet nestling ahead. I might have been miles from the rumble of the work-a-day world.

I smiled — somewhat cynically, I will confess — as I pulled the old-fashioned knocker. There were few persons yet who knew, as I did, the shadows surrounding the wedding-night vanishing of Norris Endicott. Could Madelyn solve the problem that had already taken rank as the most baffling police case of five years?

The sphinx-like face of Susan Bolton greeted me on the other side of the door. She was dressed for the street in her prim bonnet and black silk gown.

"Miss Madelyn said you would be here, Miss Noraker," she greeted me. "I thought I might meet you on my way to the Missionary Tea."

Crime and a Missionary Tea! I smiled at the

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incongruity as I protested, "But I never told her I was coming! How in the world — "

Susan threw up her mittened hands. "Law, child, don't you know she has a way of finding out things?"

A sudden laugh and the friendly bark of a dog sounded from the end of the hall. A slight figure in black stepped toward me with her two hands extended. At her heels, Peter the Great trotted lazily.

"I am glad you came before six!" she said, as she seized and held both of my hands, a distinctively Madelyn Mack habit. "I was afraid you would be delayed. The trolley service to the Van Sutton place is abominable!"

"But why did you want me before six?" I cried. "And how did you know I was coming at all? And how — "

Madelyn released my hands with a smile. "Really, you must give me time to catch my breath! Come into the den with Peter the Great, and toast yourself while we cross-examine each other."

It was not until she was drawn up before the crackling log in the great open fireplace, with the dog curled contentedly on the jaguar skin at her feet, that she spoke again, and then it was in the rapid-fire fashion that showed me she was "hot on a winding trail," as she would express it.

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"I will answer your questions first," she began, as she rested her chin on her left hand in her favorite attitude and peered across at me, her eyes glowing with the restless energy of her mood. "I telephoned the *Bugle* office this morning and was told that you had just left for 'The Maples.' Of course I knew that Nora Noraker, the star reporter, would be put on the Van Sutton case at once, and I had a shrewd idea from past experience that you would bring the problem to me before night. As I am to meet Adolph Van Sutton here at six, I was anxious to review the field with you before his arrival. I was retained in the case this afternoon, as I rather expected to be, after I had read the early editions of the papers and saw that the police would have to abandon their obvious theory."

I raised my eyebrows. "What is that?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Murder! I had not read half a dozen paragraphs before I saw that this, of course, was absurd, and that even the police would have to admit as much before night."

"But they haven't!" I cut in triumphantly. "Detective Wiley gave out an interview just before I left — said there was no doubt that Endicott had been made away with!"

"Then the more fool he!" Madelyn stirred the gnarled log in the fireplace until a shower of yellow

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sparks went dancing up the chimney. "I could show him his mistake in three sentences."

For a moment she sat staring at me, with her long lashes veiling a slow smile.

"Do they use gas or electricity at 'The Maples'?" she asked, abruptly.

I thought for a moment. "Both," I answered. "Why?"

"Was either burning in Endicott's room at the time of his disappearance?"

I shook my head with a helpless smile.

Madelyn rubbed her hands gently through the long, shaggy hair of Peter the Great. We both sat staring into the fire for quite five minutes. "Did Endicott dress at 'The Maples' for the ceremony?" she demanded suddenly. "Or did he dress before he appeared at the house?" I could feel her eyes studying me as I pondered the question.

I looked up finally with an expression of rueful bewilderment.

"Oh, Nora! Nora!" she cried, with a little stamp of her foot. "Where are your eyes and your ears? And you at the house all day!"

"I rather flattered myself that I had found out all there was to find," I answered somewhat petulantly.

Madelyn reached over to the divan by her elbow

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and selected a copy of the *Bugle* from the stack of crumpled papers that it contained. It was not until she had read slowly through the five-column report of the Van Sutton mystery — two columns of which I had contributed myself — that she looked up. "I presume you have mentioned here everything of importance?"

I nodded. "Norris Endicott was above suspicion — morally and financially. He had few friends — that is, close friends — but no enemies. There was absolutely no one who wished him ill, no one who might have a reason for doing so, unless —"

Madelyn noted my hesitation with a swift flash. "You mean his defeated rivals for Miss Van Sutton's hand?"

"You have taken the words out of my mouth. There were two of them, and both were present at the wedding — that didn't take place. Curiously enough, one of the two was Endicott's best man, Willard White. The other he also knew more or less intimately — Richard Bainbridge, the civil engineer." I gazed across at her as I paused. To my disappointment, she was studying the carpet, with her thoughts obviously far away. "That is all, I think," I finished rather lamely.

The log in the fireplace fell downward with a shower of fresh sparks. Peter the Great growled

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uneasily. Madelyn took the dog's head in her lap, and was silent so long I thought she had forgotten me.

Suddenly she leaned back in her chair and her eyes half closed.

"One more question, Nora, if you please. I believe you said in your report that, when the group of searchers were leaving Endicott's vacant room, a small, silver ball rolled from the sill to the floor. Do you happen to know whether the ball is solid or hollow?"

I smiled. "It is hollow. I examined it this afternoon. But surely such a trivial incident —"

Madelyn pushed back her chair with a quick gesture of satisfaction. "How often must I tell you that nothing is trivial — in crime? That answer atones for all of your previous failures, Nora. You may go to the head of the class! No, not another word!" she interrupted as I stared at her. "I don't want to think or talk — now. I must have some music to clear my brain if I am to scatter these cobwebs!"

I sank back with a sigh of resignation and watched her as she stepped across to the phonograph, resting on the cabinet of records in the corner. I knew from experience that she had veered into a mood in which I would have gained an instant rebuke had I attempted to press the case

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farther. Patiently or impatiently, I must await her pleasure to reopen our discussion.

"What shall it be?" she asked almost gaily, with her nervous alertness completely gone as she stooped over the record-case. "How would the quartet from 'Rigoletto' strike your mood? I think it would be ideal, for my part."

From Verdi we circled to Donizetti's "Lucia," and then, in an odd whim, her hand drew forth a haphazard selection from "William Tell." It was the latter part of the ballet music, and the record was perhaps half completed when the door opened — we had not heard the bell — and Susan announced Adolph Van Sutton.

Madelyn rose, but she did not stop the machine. Mr. Van Sutton plumped nervously into the seat that she extended to him, gazing with obvious embarrassment at her radiant face as she stood with her head bent forward and a faint smile on her lips, completely under the sway of Rossini's matchless music.

She stopped the machine sharply at the end of the record. When she whirled back toward us, "William Tell" had been forgotten. She was again the sharp-eyed, sharp-questioning ferret, with no thought beyond the problem of the moment. I think the transformation astonished our caller even more than the glimpse of her unexpected mood at

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his entrance. I could imagine that his matter-of-fact, commercial mind was floundering in the effort to understand the remarkable young woman before him.

Madelyn changed her seat to one almost directly opposite her nervous client. She was about to speak when she noted his eyes turned questioningly in my direction.

"This is my friend, Miss Noraker, Mr. Van Sutton," she announced formally. "I believe you have met before."

Mr. Van Sutton polished his glasses with his handkerchief as he responded somewhat dubiously. "Miss Noraker is a — a reporter, I believe? Don't you think, Miss Mack, that our conversation should be, er — private?"

I had already risen when Madelyn motioned to me to pause. "Miss Noraker is not here in her newspaper capacity. She is a personal friend who has accompanied me in so many of my cases that I look upon her almost as a lieutenant. You can rest assured that nothing which you or I would wish kept silent will be published!"

Mr. Van Sutton's face cleared, and he bowed to me as if in apology. "Very well, Miss Mack. I am sure I can rely upon your discretion perfectly."

I resumed my chair at a sign from Madelyn, and our visitor stared out into the grey dusk, with the

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lines of his clean-shaven face showing the uneasiness and worry of the past twenty-four hours.

Madelyn was the first to speak. "Will you tell me candidly, Mr. Van Sutton, why you objected so persistently to your daughter's marriage?"

Our caller swung around in his chair as though a shot had been fired at his elbow. "What do you mean, young woman?"

Madelyn dropped her chin on to her hand and the fleeting twinkle I know so well flashed into her eyes. "Six months ago, you positively refused to consider Norris Endicott as your daughter's suitor. Three months ago he approached you again and you refused him a second time. It was only four weeks ago, that you gave your consent — a somewhat grudging one, if I must be plain — and the date of the wedding was fixed almost immediately."

Adolph Van Sutton stared across at Madelyn with widening eyes. The flush faded from his cheeks, leaving them a dull white.

"I employed you, Miss Mack, to trace Norris Endicott, not to burrow into my personal affairs!"

Madelyn stepped toward the door. "I will send in the bill for my services within the week, Mr. Van Sutton. Did you leave your hat in the hall?"

"Am I to understand that you are throwing up the case?"

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"Yes, sir."

Adolph Van Sutton thrust his hands restlessly into his pockets. "I — I beg your pardon, Miss Mack! Please sit down, and overlook a nervous man's excitability. You can hardly understand the strain I am under. You were asking me — what was it you were asking me? Ah, you were inquiring into my relations with young Endicott!"

Mr. Van Sutton rolled his handkerchief into a ball between his hands as Madelyn coldly resumed her chair. "There is really nothing to tell you. You are a woman of the world, Miss Mack. I objected to Mr. Endicott as a husband for my daughter because, frankly, he was a poor man — and Bertha has hardly been raised in a manner that would teach her economy. Have I made myself clear?" He dropped his handkerchief into his pocket and his lips tightened. "Bertha had her own way in the end — as she generally does — and I gave in. Is there anything more?"

"I believe that personally you preferred Willard White as a son-in-law. Am I right?"

"What of it?"

Madelyn gave a little sigh. "Nothing — nothing! You have been very patient, Mr. Van Sutton. I am going to ask you just one question more — before we leave for 'The Maples.' Does the sec-

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ond story veranda under Mr. Endicott's window extend along the entire side of the house?"

I think that we both stared at her.

"The second story veranda?" repeated Mr. Van Sutton. "I thought you told me that you had never been to my home!"

Madelyn snapped her fingers with a suggestion of impatience. "I know there *must* be such a veranda! There could be no other way —" She bit her sentence through as though checking an unspoken thought. "Unless I am mistaken, it extends from the front entirely to the rear. Am I correct?"

"You are, but —"

Madelyn pressed the bell at her elbow. "I see you have brought your automobile. I will take the liberty of asking you to share our dinner here. Then we can start for 'The Maples' immediately afterward. With luck we should reach there shortly after eight. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Really, Miss Mack —"

But Madelyn waved her hand, and the matter was settled.

III

THE clock was exactly on the stroke of eight when our machine whirled through the broad gate of "The Maples," after an invigorating dash

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through the New Jersey shadows. At the end of the driveway we saw the colonial mansion, whose wedding night festivities had been so abruptly shattered.

If we had expected a house buried in the gloom of mystery we were disappointed. "The Maples" was a blaze of light from cellar to attic. It was not until the automobile stopped at the front veranda, and the solemn face of the butler presented itself with its mutely questioning glance, that we found our first hint of crime or tragedy.

Mr. Van Sutton conducted us at once to the library — a long, high, massively furnished room toward the end of the central hall extending entirely through the house. At the door, he turned with a short bow.

"It is needless to say, of course, that the house and its inmates are at your service. I am completely ignorant of your methods, Miss Mack. If you will let me know — "

He stopped, for Madelyn had walked over to one of the long dormer windows and stood staring out into the darkness, with her hands beating a low tattoo on the glass.

"Is Mr. Endicott's room on this side?" she asked without turning.

"Almost directly overhead."

"And the drawing-room — where the ceremony

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"MADELYN . . . STOOD STARING OUT INTO THE DARKNESS."

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was to have been performed — I take it, is on the other side?"

There was a faraway note in her voice, which told me that she hardly heard Mr. Van Sutton's formal assent.

For perhaps three minutes she remained peering out into the shadowy lawn, as oblivious to our presence as though she had been alone. Our host was pacing back and forth over the polished floor when she whirled.

"Will you take me up to Mr. Endicott's room now, please?"

Mr. Van Sutton strode to the door with an air of relief. "I, myself, will escort you."

Madelyn did not speak during the ascent to the upper floor. Once Mr. Van Sutton ventured a remark, but she made no effort to reply, and he desisted with a shrug. She did not even break her silence when he threw open the door of a chamber at the end of the corridor, and we realized that we were in the room of the missing bridegroom.

For a moment we paused at the threshold, as our guide found the switch and turned on the electric lights. It was a large, airy apartment, with a small alcove at one end containing a bed, and a door at the other end opening into a marble-tiled bathroom. An effort had been made to preserve the contents exactly as they had been found on the previous

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evening. The dressing table was still strewn with a varied assortment of toilet articles, as though they had just been dropped. The curtain of one window was jerked to the top, while its companion hung decorously to the sill.

Madelyn darted merely a cursory glance at the room. Stepping across to the writing-table, she seized the waste paper basket leaning against its side. It was empty. In spite of this fact, she lifted it to the table and whipped out a small magnifying glass from her hand-bag. For fully five minutes she bent over it, studying the woven straw with as much eagerness as a miner searching for gold dust.

When she straightened, her eyes flashed uncertainly around the walls. Directly opposite was an asbestos grate of gas logs. She sank on to her knees before it, the magnifying glass again to her eyes.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Mack?" Mr. Van Sutton asked impatiently.

She did not even glance in our direction. Rising to her feet, she stepped back to the writing-table where two ash trays were resting. "Were these Mr. Endicott's?"

"I — I suppose so. Why?"

Madelyn carried the trays nearer to the light. One held a litter of ashes; the second tray both

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ashes and crumbling cigarette stubs. I caught a curious flicker of satisfaction in her eyes.

"Mr. Endicott must have been something of a smoker, wasn't he?" she asked, as though mentioning a self-evident fact.

"On the contrary, he was not!" retorted Mr. Van Sutton.

"Good!" she cried so heartily that we both stared at her. As she returned the trays, her abstraction vanished. I even caught the fragment of a tune under her breath when she threw open the door of the roomy closet at the other side of the room. It was Schumann's "Traumerei."

A man's light grey street suit was hanging from the row of clothes hooks on the wall. On the floor, a pair of shoes had been tossed. It did not need our host's terse comment to tell us that they belonged to Norris Endicott.

"You will find nothing there, Miss Mack," he volunteered. "The police have had the pockets inside out half a dozen times!"

A cry from Madelyn interrupted him. She had passed the suit with a shrug and had seized the discarded shoes.

"What is it?" Mr. Van Sutton demanded, pressing forward.

Madelyn tossed the shoes back to the floor. Closing the door, she stood tapping her jade brace-

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let. Again I thought that I heard the strains of "Traumerei." "I was once asked to name a detective's first rule of guidance," she said irrelevantly. "I answered to remember always that nothing is trivial — in crime." She paused. "Every day I find something new to prove the correctness of my rule!"

"But surely you have discovered nothing — "

Madelyn gazed at the owner of "The Maples" with her peculiar twinkle. "There are two persons in this house with whom I would like a few moments' conversation. They are the butler and Miss Van Sutton's maid. Could you have them sent to the library?"

"Certainly. Is there anything else?"

Madelyn reached absently across to the ash trays again. There seemed a peculiar fascination for her in their prosaic litter.

"Could I also have the honor of a short interview with your daughter?"

Mr. Van Sutton inclined his head and stepped into the hall. As I followed him, the door was closed sharply behind us. I whirled around and heard the key turn. Madelyn had locked herself in.

Mr. Van Sutton straightened with a frown. Then, without a word, he spun about on his heels and strode toward his daughter's boudoir. I descended the stairs alone.

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"AS SHE SPREAD IT OPEN IN HER LAP, APPARENTLY FOR THE FIRST TIME SHE RECALLED THE BUTLER."

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It was almost a quarter of an hour later that Madelyn rejoined me. She nodded briefly to the butler, who was sitting on the edge of a chair as stiffly erect as a ramrod. But she did not pause. Hardly deigning a glance at me, she stepped over to the long shelves of books, built higher than her arms could reach, and her hand zigzagged along the rich leather bindings and gilt letters. Selecting a massive morocco volume from one of the central rows, she dropped into the nearest seat. The book was an encyclopedia, extending from the letter "H" to the letter "N."

As she spread it open in her lap, apparently for the first time she recalled the butler. She glanced up.

"You will excuse me?"

"Yes, madam!"

"I will be through in a moment!"

"Yes, madam!"

Jenkins' face resumed its stolidness, and Madelyn's gaze dropped to her book. She could not have read a dozen lines, however, when she closed it and sprang to her feet. She paced across the library, her hands behind her back.

"I have only one question to ask, Jenkins."

"Yes, madam!"

"I wish to know whether Mr. Endicott ordered a tray of ashes brought up to his room last night?"

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Jenkins' eyes widened and his hands dropped to his sides. "A tray of ashes?" he stammered.

"I believe that is what I said!"

With a visible effort Jenkins recovered his composure. His twenty years' training had not been in vain. "No, madam!" he answered in a rather dubious tone.

"Are you absolutely sure? I may tell you that a great deal depends upon your answer!"

Jenkins' voice recovered its steadiness. "I am quite sure!"

"Is it possible that you would not know?"

"I am confident that I would know!"

Madelyn sank into the leather rocker by her side, with an expression of the most genuine disappointment that I have ever seen her exhibit. In the silence that followed, the ticking of the colonial clock in the corner sounded with harsh distinctness. Outside in the hall I fancied I heard a repressed cough. Miss Van Sutton's maid evidently was awaiting her turn. Madelyn's slight, black-garbed figure had fallen back in her chair, and her right hand was pressed over her eyes.

"Would you mind leaving the room for a few moments, Nora? No, Jenkins, I wish that you would stay. I find that I have another question for you."

Annette, the maid, was walking back and forth

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in the hall as I opened the door. She glanced toward me, but did not speak. I had hardly noted the details of her figure, however, when the door of the library opened again and the butler followed me. Dull wonder was written on his face as he nodded shortly to the girl to take his place.

My thoughts were broken by the swish of skirts on the stairs. The next moment I faced Adolph Van Sutton and his daughter. This was the first time during the day that I had seen the latter. She had remained locked in her room since morning, denying all interviewers, and only giving Detective Wiley a scant five minutes after his third request. I had expected to find evidences of a pronounced strain after her prostration of the previous evening, but I was startled by her pallor as her father took her arm and led her down the hall.

Of all the heart-broken women, whether of cottage or mansion, with whom my newspaper career has brought me in contact, there was no figure more pathetic than that of the heiress of the Van Sutton millions as she swayed toward me on that eventful night.

Bertha Van Sutton crossed wearily into the library as the maid emerged. "I have one favor to request, Miss Mack, and if you have ever suffered in your life-time, you will grant it. Please be as brief as possible!"

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"Do you want me here?" her father asked.

Madelyn had walked over to the book shelves, and was again delving into the pages of the morocco encyclopedia. "I would prefer not!" she answered without looking up.

It was well toward half-past nine (I had glanced at my watch a dozen times) when the two women in the library emerged. The form of Bertha Van Sutton was bent even more than before, and it was evident at a glance that the strain of the interview had brought her almost to the point of a collapse.

As I started forward, the light flashed for an instant on a round gleaming object in Madelyn Mack's hand. It was the small silver ball that had been found in Norris Endicott's room.

At that moment, the front bell tinkled through the house. There was a short conversation in the vestibule, and then Jenkins ushered a tall, loosely jointed figure into the hall. It was Detective Wiley of the Newark headquarters. (Of course the affair at "The Maples" had come under the jurisdiction of the New Jersey police.)

The detective's ruddy face, with its stubble of beard, was flushed with an unusual excitement, and his stiff, sandy moustache stood out in two bristling lines from his mouth. He received Madelyn's bow with a short, half contemptuous nod, as he snapped

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out, "I'm right after all, Mr. Van Sutton! It's murder — nothing more nor less!"

"Murder!" The gasp came from Bertha Van Sutton. For an instant I thought she was about to faint.

Wiley glanced around the group with a suggestion of conscious importance which did not leave him, even in the tension of the moment.

"We have found Mr. Endicott's clothes in Thompson's Creek — and the coat is covered with blood!"

Madelyn Mack gently led Bertha Van Sutton to the chair I had vacated. One hand was stroking the girl's temples as she turned.

"You are wrong, Mr. Wiley!" she said quietly. "For the peace of mind of this household, I am willing to stake my reputation that you are wrong."

Detective Wiley whirled with a sneer. "Really, you astound me, my lady policeman! May I humbly inquire how your pink tea wisdom deduces so much?"

Madelyn smoothed the folds of her coat as she straightened. "I have promised Miss Van Sutton that if she and her father will call at 'The Rosary' to-morrow afternoon at four, I will give them a complete explanation of this unfortunate affair! You may call also if you are interested, Mr. Wiley

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— and don't arrest the murderer in the meantime! Will you kindly loan us your motor for the trip back to town,' Mr. Van Sutton?"

IV

I CONFESS that I approached Madelyn Mack's chalet the next day with pronounced skepticism. The morning papers of both New York and Newark had been crammed with the discovery of Norris Endicott's blood-stained garments, and were full of hysterical praise for the "masterly work" of Detective Joseph Wiley.

Some one had found that Madelyn Mack had also been retained in the case, and the reporters had tried in vain to obtain an interview. In the face of her silence, the applause for the police had become even more emphasized.

She was alone when I entered; but, as I pointed to the clock just on the verge of four, she held up her hand. The bell sounded through the house, and the next moment Susan conducted Adolph Van Sutton and his daughter into the room.

In the confusion of the greeting, the signs of nervous strain on Madelyn's face struck me sharply. It did not need her weary admission to tell me that she had spent a racking day, nor that she had had frequent recourse to the stimulant of her cola ber-

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ries. Even her hair, about whose arrangement she generally was precise to the point of nervousness, was dishevelled, and once, when Peter the Great thrust his nose into her lap, she ordered him impatiently away.

The Van Suttons had hardly seated themselves when there was a step in the hall and the last guest of the afternoon made his appearance. There was not the slightest hint of ill humor in Madelyn's greeting as Detective Wiley somewhat awkwardly took the hand that she extended to him.

"Have you traced the murderer yet, Mr. Wiley?"

"No, but I expect to have him in custody within the next twenty-four hours!" Detective Wiley dropped heavily into his chair and crossed his knees.

"May I ask if you have found the body?"

"I can't say that we have, but we have certain information which —"

Madelyn walked over to the end of the room where she could face the entire group. She was the only one of us who was standing.

"Then I am more fortunate than you are!"

The detective bounded from his seat, his sandy moustache — the barometer of his emotions — bristling. "I am not a man to trifle with, Miss Mack. Do you mean to tell me —"

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"That I have discovered the body of Norris Endicott? You have caught my meaning exactly!"

Wiley stood staring at her in a sort of tongue-tied amazement. A gasp recalled me to the other occupants of the room. Bertha Van Sutton was devouring Madelyn's face as though pleading with her to end her suspense. Her father was stroking her hand.

Madelyn stepped to the door and threw it open. On the threshold stood a young man in a brown tweed suit, with a purple lump showing just at the edge of his hair. He stared at us as though he were dazed by a sudden light.

Bertha Van Sutton darted across the room, with a cry, and threw herself into his arms.

It was Norris Endicott.

Madelyn sprang to her side, with a query intensely practical — and intensely feminine. "Has she fainted?"

"I — I think so." Norris Endicott stood gazing down at his burden helplessly.

"We must carry her into the next room then — take hold of her shoulders, please! No, the rest of you stand back! It needs a woman to take care of a woman!"

Detective Wiley strode over to the desk telephone and called police headquarters. He had just turned

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from the instrument when the door opened and Madelyn returned.

"She is all right, I assure you!" she cried hastily, as Adolph Van Sutton started from his chair. "I have left her with Mr. Endicott. On the whole, he is the best nurse we could find. Sit down, Mr. Wiley. You will find that rocker more comfortable, Mr. Van Sutton. It is not a long story that I have to tell, but it contains its tragedy — and we have to thank Providence that it isn't a double one!"

She paused, as though marshalling her thoughts. Detective Wiley surveyed her uneasily.

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Van Sutton, that your daughter is a widow! Or perhaps — as I wish to be entirely frank — I should say that I am glad to convey this announcement to you!" Her slight, black figure bent forward. "Your daughter's husband was one of the greatest scamps that ever went unpunished!"

"But my daughter never had a husband, Miss Mack! You forget —"

"I forget nothing! Has it ever occurred to you that there might be a chapter in Miss Van Sutton's life unknown to you? Pray keep your seat, my dear sir! You are a man of the world and a father. You have the knowledge of the one and the heart of the other. When I tell you that during your

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daughter's college days — Nora, will you kindly pour Mr. Van Sutton a little of that brandy? Thank you!"

Madelyn did not change her position as the owner of "The Maples" gulped down the liquor. She waited until he had finished, her chin still on her hand, her eyes never shifting.

"Let me give you the explanation of our mystery in a few words, Mr. Van Sutton. The wedding ceremony of Wednesday night was not performed — because your daughter was already a wife! Norris Endicott disappeared from 'The Maples' — eliminated himself — to save her from one of the most agonizing alternatives that ever confronted a woman!"

Behind me, I heard Detective Wiley give a cry of sudden comprehension.

"Incredible, impossible as it may seem, Miss Van Sutton did not know of the barrier to her marriage until the ceremony was less than an hour distant. What she would have done under other circumstances I don't know. It was the man, who was waiting to lead her to the altar, who came to her rescue!"

Madelyn spoke in as emotionless a tone as though she were discussing the weather. There was even a bored note in her voice as though the glamour of the problem had left her — with its solution.

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"To understand the situation, we must go back quite five years. When Miss Van Sutton was a senior at Vassar she fell in love with the matinee idol of a New York stock company. Reginald Winters was a man with a character as shallow as his heart. Bluntly, he knew of your wealth, and schemed to gain a part of it. You don't find the situation unusual, do you? In the end, he persuaded Miss Bertha to elope with him. But he made a slight error. He did not investigate your disposition until after the marriage.

"He was too shrewd to risk an open avowal and a paternal storm. Rather a canny villain, as a matter of fact! He set on foot a series of inquiries which showed him, too late, that, rather than accept him in your house, you would lose your daughter.

"A disinherited heiress did not appeal to him. Less than a week after the elopement, your daughter awoke to the fact that she was deserted. Mr. Van Sutton, you must calm yourself! I warn you I will not relate the sequel unless you do!

"Fate plays us queer pranks. Or is it Fate? I come now to the first suggestion of the fantastic. A year later, Miss Van Sutton read in a report of a wreck — somewhere in the West, I believe — that Reginald Winters had been killed. I don't know what her emotions were. I imagine she was

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like the prisoner who inhales his first breath of freedom.

"I think you can guess the next chapter? Am I verging too much on the lines of the woman novelist? It was not until the evening which was to have made her the bride of Norris Endicott, that she discovered her ghastly mistake — which another hour would have made still more ghastly.

"Reginald Winters not only was living, but he had followed her to her father's door. To make our melodrama complete, in a characteristic note he reminded her of the disagreeable fact that she was his wife."

Madelyn's eyes closed wearily. When she opened them, the lines of strain on her face seemed more intense than ever — in contrast to her light tone.

"In a novel, the bride, driven to desperation, would have killed her Nemesis. But women of real life seldom have the desperation of those of romance. Bertha Van Sutton turned to the last refuge in the world that the woman in the novel would have sought. She carried her burden and her problem to the man who was waiting to place his wedding ring on her finger.

"She dismissed her maid, bolted the door of her room, and stepped out on to the veranda below, with a dark cloak thrown over her white dress. Once at Norris Endicott's apartment, it was a

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matter of only an instant to bring him to the window.

"He comprehended the situation in a flash. Of course, it was obvious enough — after the first shock. The marriage could not take place. But how could it be prevented? The girl could have told the truth, of course. Was there no other way? And then Endicott made his decision. He must disappear — until he could find and reckon with the man who was threatening her. A Don Quixotic plan? Could you have made a better one? He sent Miss Van Sutton back to her room, and made his preparations for flight.

"It was not until the clock struck eight, however, that he nerved himself to the crucial step, and swung out from the veranda to the lawn below. It was a drop of perhaps twelve feet, and he made it without accident. While Willard White was calling his name through the room, he was watching him from the shadows of the yard.

"Now we come again to the unkindness of Fate. He was threading his way through the shrubbery adjoining Thompson's Creek when his foot caught in a vine and he was thrown to the ground. His head struck on a stone and for nearly an hour he lay unconscious. When he struggled to his feet, his coat and collar were matted with blood.

"Without a thought of possible consequences, he

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dropped them into the water. I believe that is where you found them, Mr. Wiley. It was nearly daylight when he reached his rooms, almost exhausted.

"He had but one coherent thought. He must find Reginald Winters — without delay and without publicity. The note, which the actor had written to Miss Van Sutton, contained the address of his hotel — an obscure Fourth Avenue boarding-house in New York. It was easy enough to find the hotel — but the man was out.

"All of that day and night he watched the building, like a hungry dog watches a bone. It was not until this morning that Winters returned. Then he reappeared in the street so quickly that Endicott had no time to follow him up to his room.

"The actor swung off toward Broadway, with Endicott stubbornly following him. At Thirty-fourth Street and Sixth Avenue, there was a tie-up of the surface cars, and the crossing was jammed. I see you are anticipating what followed! Well — the wheel of fortune turned abruptly. Winters plunged into the swarm of vehicles, absorbed in his thoughts. Just before he reached the curb, a dray swayed before him. He dodged — too late. The rearing team crushed him to the pavement.

"When they picked him up he was quite dead.

"It was over his body that Norris Endicott and

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I met for the first time — with the realization that Bertha Van Sutton was free.

"As a matter of fact, I had been 'shadowing' Mr. Endicott, as you would express it, Mr. Wiley, for several hours." Madelyn pushed back her chair and walked across the room, drawing long, deep breaths.

"Have I made myself quite clear?"

"Are you a woman or a wizard?" gasped Adolph Van Sutton.

Detective Wiley sprang to his feet. "I'm doing what I never thought I would have to do, Miss Mack." He held out his hand. "Apologizing to a petticoat detective! But I don't see how on earth you did it!"

Madelyn shrugged. "Now we are descending to the commonplace." She leaned against the mantel with a yawn. Adolph Van Sutton thrust an unlighted cigar nervously into his mouth.

"Have you done me the honor to remember a certain maxim of mine — that nothing is trivial in crime? But — this is not a lecture on deduction!

"Miss Van Sutton's connection with the affair really was plain after that first newspaper report. By the way, Nora, did you write the description of the bride's wedding dress? I thought I recognized your style. May I congratulate you? From the viewpoint — "

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"Aren't we veering from the subject, Miss Mack?" Detective Wiley broke in impatiently.

"Do you think so?" Madelyn's eyes rested on his florid face. "I was particularly interested, Nora, in your account of the bride's coiffure. I agree with you that it was decidedly becoming. I remember that you mentioned that her *point d'esprit* veil was fastened by two long pins, each with a sterling silver ball as a head."

A sudden light broke over me. "And the silver ball that was found in Norris Endicott's room was one of those, of course!"

Madelyn smiled. "Your penetration amazes me! It was your own report of the case that gave me my first and most important clue before we left this house.

"I think you will agree that my inference was plain enough. Miss Van Sutton had visited Norris Endicott's room after she was dressed for the ceremony — and consequently just before his disappearance. She had kept the fact secret — and she was so agitated that she did not miss the loss of a valuable hair ornament. Why?

"There was another question that I put to myself. How had she reached the room? The discovery of the silver ball on the sill suggested, of course, the window. What was under the window? Here I found that a second-story veranda extended

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along the entire side of the house. Miss Van Sutton then had only to step out of her own window to find a channel of communication ready made for her. You see I had a fairly good working foundation before we entered 'The Maples.'

"You may recall that I found much interest in Endicott's ash trays. Have you ever studied the relation of tobacco to human emotions, Mr. Wiley? You will find it a singularly suggestive field of thought, I assure you.

"The number of cigarette-ends impressed you, perhaps, as it did me. I don't know whether you noticed that, in nearly every case, the cigarette had only been half consumed — and was so torn and crushed as to suggest that it had been thrown aside in disgust. What was the natural conclusion? Obviously, that a man in an extreme state of nervous excitement had been smoking. Now, what could agitate Norris Endicott so remarkably? Not his approaching wedding, surely! Then what? How about the sudden necessity of eliminating himself from that wedding?

"In the closet, you may remember, I found a pair of the bridegroom's shoes. In their way, their presence was exceedingly remarkable. On the hooks, above, was the street suit which Endicott had taken off in preparing for the ceremony. The shoes, however, were the thin-soled, expensive foot-

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wear that a man would use only on dress occasions. What had become of the street shoes that you would expect to find in the closet? My course of reasoning was simple. After Endicott had dressed for the wedding, something had occurred which forced him to change back to his heavier boots. What? The knowledge, of course, that he was about to leave the house on a rough trip. We now have the conclusion that he vanished of his own volition, that he knew where and why he was going, and that he made certain plans for leaving.

"It was the next point which I found the most baffling — and which led me into my first error." Madelyn came to a pause by the rug of Peter the Great. The dog rose, yawning, to his feet and thrust his nose into her hand.

"Perhaps you are wondering, Mr. Van Sutton, why I locked myself into the room after you and Miss Noraker had left? Frankly, I was not satisfied with my investigation — and I wanted to be alone. For instance, there was an object on Mr. Endicott's dressing table that puzzled me greatly. Under ordinary circumstances I might not have noticed it. It was the second tray of ashes.

"They were *not* tobacco ashes. It didn't need a second glance to tell me that they had come from a wood fire. Certainly there had not been a wood fire in that room — and, if there had been, why the

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necessity of preserving so small a part of the ashes?

"I will admit frankly that I was about to give up the problem in disgust when I remembered my examination of the waste paper basket and the grate. I had reasoned that Mr. Endicott's flight had been made necessary after he entered the house. By what? What more likely than a message, perhaps a note, perhaps a telegram? In nine cases out of ten, a nervous man would have burned or destroyed such a message; but, in spite of my closest search, I found no traces of it. It was not until I was moving away from my saucer of ashes that my search was rewarded. In the tray was a single torn fragment of white paper.

"There were no others. Either the shreds had been carefully gathered up after the message was destroyed — which was hardly likely — or the fragment before me had been torn from a corner in a moment of agitation. But why had I found it in the ashes?"

Madelyn glanced up at Mr. Van Sutton with an abrupt turning of the subject. "Do you ever read 'Ovid'?"

The owner of "The Maples" gazed at her with a frown of bewilderment.

"Really, you are missing a decided treat, Mr. Van Sutton. There is a quaint charm about those

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early Greek poets for which I have looked in vain in our modern literature. Ovid's verses on love, for instance, and his whimsical letters to maidens who have fallen early victims to the divine passion —"

"Are you joking or torturing me, Miss Mack?" Madelyn's face grew suddenly grave.

"I am sorry. Believe me, I beg your pardon! But — it was Ovid who showed me the purpose of the tray of ashes! In one of his most famous verses there is a recipe for sympathetic ink, designed to assist in the writing of discreet love letters, I believe.

"It is astonishingly simple. No mysterious chemicals, no visits to a pharmacist. Instead of ink, you write your letters in — milk! Of course, the words are invisible. Apparently you are leaving no trace on the paper. Rub the sheet with wood ashes, however, and your message is perfectly legible! I don't know where Ovid found the recipe. It has survived, though, for seventeen hundred years. There is only one caution in its use. Make sure that the milk is not skimmed!

"A letter in invisible ink, you will admit, was thoroughly in keeping with the other details of our mystery. The encyclopedia in the library convinced me that I had made no mistake in my recipe — and then I turned to the butler, and my theory

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received its first jar. Mr. Endicott had ordered no saucer of ashes. Moreover, no note, no telegram, not even a telephone call had come for him.

"For a moment, I was absolutely hopeless. Then I sent you from the room, Nora, so that Jenkins would not feel constrained to silence — and put the question which solved the problem.

"It was not Jenkins, however, who gave me my answer. It was Miss Van Sutton's maid. The tray of ashes had not been ordered by the groom. It had been ordered — by the bride.

"I may as well add here that Miss Van Sutton explained to me later that this had been the method of communication between her and Reginald Winters. She had suggested it herself in her college days when Ovid was almost her daily companion. It was Winters' custom to scribble his initial on the corner of the paper. This was her clue, of course, that the apparently blank sheet contained a communication."

Madelyn stooped over the shaggy form of Peter the Great, and his tongue caressed her hand.

"It was at this juncture that Miss Van Sutton was ushered into the library. I did not ask her for the note. I was well enough acquainted with my sex to know that this would be useless. I told her what was in it — and requested her to tell me if I was wrong."

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Madelyn walked back to her chair, and, for the first time during her recital, the lines in her face relaxed.

"She gave me the note — I believe that is all. Of course, Winters' address told me where I would find Norris Endicott, and I located him this morning. Is there anything else?"

There was no answer.

"Nora," said Madelyn, turning to me. "Would you mind starting the phonograph? I think that Rubinstein's 'Melody in F' would suit my mood perfectly. Thank you!"

Early in the following week the postponed wedding of Norris Endicott and Bertha Van Sutton was quietly performed, and the couple departed on a tour of Europe. The bride did not see the body of Reginald Winters. Months afterward, however, I learned that she had bought a secluded grave-lot for the man who had so nearly brought disaster to her life.

In Madelyn Mack's relic case to-day, there are two objects of peculiar interest to me. One is a small, silver ball, perhaps three-quarters of an inch in diameter. The other is an apparently blank sheet of paper — except for a bold, dashing "W" in the upper right-hand corner.

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III

CINDERELLA'S SLIPPER

I

RAYMOND RENNICK might have been going to his wedding instead of to his — death.

Spick and span in a new spring suit, he paused just outside the broad, arched gates of the Duffield estate and drew his silver cigarette case from his pocket. A self-satisfied smile flashed across his face as he struck a match and inhaled the fragrant odor of the tobacco. It was good tobacco, very good tobacco — and Senator Duffield's private secretary was something of a judge!

For a moment Rennick lingered. It was a day to banish uncomfortable thoughts, to smooth the rough edges of a man's problems — and burdens. As the secretary glanced up at the soft blue sky, the reflection swept his mind that his own future was as free from clouds. It was a pleasing reflection. Perhaps the cigarette, perhaps the day helped to deepen it as he swung almost jauntily up the winding driveway toward the square, white house commanding the terraced lawn beyond.

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Just ahead of him a maple tree, standing alone, rustled gaily in its spring foliage like a woman calling attention to her new finery. It was all so fresh and beautiful and innocent! Rennick felt a tingling thrill in his blood. Unconsciously he tossed away his cigarette. He reached the rustling maple and passed it. . . .

From behind the gnarled trunk, a shadow darted. A figure sprang at his shoulders, with the long blade of a dagger awkwardly poised. There was a flash of steel in the sunlight. . . .

It was perhaps ten minutes later that they found him. He had fallen face downward at the edge of the driveway, with his body half across the velvet green of the grass. A thin thread of red, creeping from the wound in his breast, was losing itself in the sod.

One hand was doubled, as in a desperate effort at defense. His glasses were twisted under his shoulders. Death must have been nearly instantaneous. The dagger had reached his heart at the first thrust. One might have fancied an expression of overpowering amazement in the staring eyes. That was all. The weapon had caught him squarely on the left side. He had evidently whirled toward the assassin almost at the instant of the blow.

Whether in the second left him of life he had recognized his assailant, and the recognition had

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made his death-blow the quicker and the surer, were questions that only deepened the horror of the noon-day crime.

As though to emphasize the hour, the mahogany clock in Senator Duffield's library rang out its twelve monotonous chimes as John Dorrence, his valet, beat sharply on the door. The echo of the nervous tattoo was lost in an unanswering silence. Dorrence repeated his knock before he brought an impatient response from beyond the panels.

"Can you come, sir?" the valet burst out. "Something awful has happened, sir. It's, it's —"

The door was flung open. A ruddy-faced man with thick, white hair and grizzled moustache, and the hints of a nervous temperament showing in his eyes and voice, sprang into the hall. Somebody once remarked that Senator Duffield was Mark Twain's double. The Senator took the comparison as a compliment, perhaps because it was a woman who made it.

Dorrence seized his master by the sleeve, which loss of dignity did more to impress the Senator with the gravity of the situation than all of the servant's excitable words.

"Mr. Rennick, sir, has been stabbed, sir, on the lawn, and Miss Beth, sir —"

Senator Duffield staggered against the wall. The valet's alarm swerved to another channel.

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"Shall I get the brandy, sir?"

"Brandy?" the Senator repeated vaguely. The next instant, as though grasping the situation anew, he sprang down the hall with the skirts of his frock coat flapping against his knees. At the door of the veranda, he whirled.

"Get the doctor on the 'phone, Dorrence — Redfield, if Scott is out. Let him know it's a matter of minutes! And, Dorrence — "

"Yes, sir!"

"Tell the telephone girl that, if this leaks to the newspapers, I will have the whole office discharged!"

A shifting group on the edge of the lawn, with that strange sense of awkwardness which sudden death brings, showed the scene of the tragedy.

The circle fell back as the Senator's figure appeared. On the grass, Rennick's body still lay where it had fallen — suggesting a skater who has ignominiously collapsed on the ice rather than a man stabbed to the heart. The group had been wondering at the fact in whispered monosyllables.

A kneeling girl was bending over the secretary's body. It was not until Senator Duffield had spoken her name twice that she glanced up. In her eyes was a grief so wild that for a moment he was held dumb.

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"Come, Beth," he said, gently, "this is no place for you."

At once the white-faced girl became the central figure of the situation. If she heard him, she gave no sign. The Senator caught her shoulder and pushed her slowly away. One of the woman-servants took her arm. Curiously enough, the two were the only members of the family that had been called to the scene.

The Senator swung on the group, with a return of his aggressiveness.

"Some one, who can talk fast and to the point, tell me the story. Burke, you have a ready tongue. How did it happen?"

The groom — a much-tanned young fellow in his early twenties — touched his cap.

"I don't know, sir. No one knows. Mr. Rennick was lying here, stabbed, when we found him. He was already dead."

"But surely there was some cry, some sound of a scuffle?"

The groom shook his head. "If there was, sir, none of us heard it. We all liked Mr. Rennick, sir. I would have gone through fire and water if he needed my help. If there had been an outcry loud enough to reach the stable, I would have been there on the jump!"

"Do you mean to tell me that Rennick could

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have been struck down in the midst of fifteen or twenty people with no one the wiser? It's ridiculous, impossible!"

Burke squared his shoulders, with an almost unconscious suggestion of dignity.

"I am telling you the truth, sir!"

The Senator's glance dropped to his secretary's body and he looked up with a shudder. Then, as though with an effort, his eyes returned to the huddled form, and he stood staring down at the dead man, with a frown knitting his brow. Once he jerked his head toward the gardener with the curt question, "Who found him?"

Jenkins shambled forward uneasily. "I did, sir. I hope you don't think I disturbed the body?"

The Senator shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He did not raise his head again until the sound of a motor in the driveway broke the tension. The surgeon had arrived. Almost at the same moment there was a cry from Jenkins.

The gardener stood perhaps a half a dozen yards from the body, staring at an object hidden in the grass at his feet. He stooped and raised it. It was a woman's slipper!

As a turn of his head showed him the eyes of the group turned in his direction, he walked across to Senator Duffield, holding his find at arm's length,

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as though its dainty outlines might conceal an adder's nest.

The slipper was of black suede, high-heeled and slender, tied with a broad, black ribbon. One end of the ribbon was broken and stained as though it had tripped its owner. On the thin sole were cakes of the peculiar red clay of the driveway.

It might have been unconscious magnetism that caused the Senator suddenly to turn his eyes in the direction of his daughter. She was swaying on the arm of the servant.

Throwing off the support of the woman, she took two quick steps forward, with her hand flung out as though to tear the slipper from him. And then, without a word, she fell prone on the grass.

II

THE telephone in my room must have been jangling a full moment before I struggled out of my sleep and raised myself to my elbow. It was with a feeling of distinct rebellion that I slipped into my kimono and slippers and shuffled across to the sputtering instrument in the corner. From eight in the morning until eight in the evening, I had been on racking duty in the Farragut poison trial, and the belated report of the wrangling jury, at an hour which made any sort of a meal impossible until

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after ten, had left me worn out physically and mentally. I glanced at my watch as I snapped the receiver to my ear. It lacked barely fifteen minutes of midnight. An unearthly hour to call a woman out of bed, even if she is past the age of sentimental dreams!

"Well?" I growled.

A laugh answered me at the other end of the wire. I would have flung the receiver back to the hook and myself back to bed had I not recognized the tones. There is only one person in the world, excepting the tyrant at our city editor's desk, who would arouse me at midnight. But I had thought this person separated from me by twelve hundred miles of ocean.

"Madelyn Mack!" I gasped.

The laughter ceased. "Madelyn Mack it is!" came back the answer, now reduced to a tone of decorous gravity. "Pardon my merriment, Nora. The mental picture of your huddled form —"

"But I thought you in Jamaica!" I broke in, now thoroughly awake.

"I was — until Saturday. Our steamer came out of quarantine at four o'clock this afternoon. As it develops, I reached here at the psychological moment."

I kicked a rocker to my side and dropped into it with a rueful glance at the rumpled sheets of the

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bed. With Madelyn Mack at the telephone at midnight, only one conclusion was possible; and such a conclusion shattered all thought of sleep.

"Have you read the evening dispatches from Boston, Nora?"

"I have read nothing — except the report of the Farragut jury!" I returned crisply. "Why?"

"If you had, you would perhaps divine the reason of my call. I have been retained in the Rennick murder case. I am taking the one-thirty sleeper for Boston. I secured our berths just before I telephoned."

"Our berths!"

"I am taking you with me. Now that you are up, you may as well dress and ring for a taxicab. I will meet you at the Roanoke hotel."

"But," I protested, "don't you think —"

"Very well, if you don't care to go! That settles it!"

"Oh, I will be there!" I said with an air of resignation. "Ten minutes to dress, and fifteen minutes for the taxi!"

"I will add five minutes for incidentals," Madelyn replied and hung up the receiver.

The elevator boy at "The Occident," where I had my modest apartment, had become accustomed to the strange hours and strange visitors of a news-

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paper woman during my three years' residence. He opened the door with a grin of sympathy as the car reached my floor. As though to give more active expression to his feelings he caught up my bag and gave it a place of honor on his own stool.

"Going far?" he queried as I alighted at the main corridor.

"I may be back in twenty-four hours and I may not be back for twenty-four days," I answered cautiously — I knew Madelyn Mack!

As I waited for the whir of the taxicab, I appropriated the evening paper on the night clerk's desk. The Rennick murder case had been given a three-column head on the front page. If I had not been so absorbed in the Farragut trial, it could not have escaped me. I had not finished the head-lines, however, when the taxi, with a promptness almost uncanny, rumbled up to the curb.

I threw myself back against the cushions, switched on the electric light, and spread my paper over my knee, as the chauffeur turned off toward Fifth Avenue. The story was well written and had made much of a few facts. Trust my newspaper instinct to know that! I had expected a fantastic puzzle — when it could spur Madelyn into action within six hours after her landing — but I was hardly anticipating a problem such as I could read between rather than in the lines of type before me.

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Long before the "Roanoke" loomed into view, I had forgotten my lost sleep.

The identity of Raymond Rennick's assassin was as baffling as in the first moments of the discovery of the tragedy. There had been no arrests — nor hint of any. From the moment when the secretary had turned into the gate of the Duffield yard until the finding of his body, all trace of his movements had been lost as effectually as though the darkness of midnight had enveloped him, instead of the sunlight of noon. More than ten minutes could not have elapsed between his entrance into the grounds and the discovery of his murder — perhaps not more than five — but they had been sufficient for the assassin to effect a complete escape.

There was not even the shadow of a motive. Raymond Rennick was one of those few men who seemed to be without an enemy. In an official capacity, his conduct was without a blemish. In a social capacity, he was admittedly one of the most popular men in Brookline — among both sexes. Rumor had it, apparently on unquestioned authority, that the announcement of his engagement to Beth Duffield was to have been an event of the early summer. This fact was in my mind as I stared out into the darkness.

On a sudden impulse, I opened the paper again. From an inside page the latest photograph of the

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Senator's daughter, taken at a fashionable Boston studio, smiled up at me. It was an excellent likeness as I remembered her at the inaugural ball the year before — a wisp of a girl, with a mass of black hair, which served to emphasize her frailness. I studied the picture with a frown. There was a sense of familiarity in its outlines, which certainly our casual meeting could not explain. Then, abruptly, my thoughts flashed back to the crowded courtroom of the afternoon — and I remembered.

In the prisoner's dock I saw again the figure of Beatrice Farragut, slender, fragile, her white face, her somber gown, her eyes fixed like those of a frightened lamb on the jury which was to give her life — or death.

"*She* poison her husband?" had buzzed the whispered comments at my shoulders during the weary weeks of the trial. "She couldn't harm a butterfly!" Like a mocking echo, the tones of the foreman had sounded the answering verdict of murder — in the first degree. And in New York this meant —

Why had Beatrice Farragut suggested Beth Duffield? Or was it Beth Duffield who had suggested — I crumpled the paper into a heap and tossed it from the window in disgust at my morbid imagination. B-u-r-r-h! And yet they say that a New York newspaper woman has no nerves!

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A voice hailed us from the darkness and a white-gowned figure sprang out on to the walk. As the chauffeur brought the machine to a halt, Madelyn Mack caught my hands.

Her next two actions were thoroughly characteristic.

Whirling to the driver, she demanded shortly, "How soon can you make the Grand Central Station?"

The man hesitated. "Can you give me twenty minutes?"

"Just! We will leave here at one sharp. You will wait, please!"

Having thus disposed of the chauffeur — Madelyn never gave a thought to the matter of expense! — she seized my arm and pushed me through the entrance of the "Roanoke" as nonchalantly as though we had parted six hours before instead of six weeks.

"I hope you enjoyed Jamaica?" I ventured.

"Did you read the evening papers on the way over?" she returned as easily as though I had not spoken.

"One," I answered shortly. Madelyn's habit of ignoring my queries grated most uncomfortably at times.

"Then you know what has been published concerning the case?"

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I nodded. "I imagine that you can add considerable."

"As a matter of fact, I know less than the reporters!" Madelyn threw open the door of her room. "You have interviewed Senator Duffield on several occasions, have you not, Nora?"

"You might say on several *delicate* occasions if you cared to!"

"You can tell me then whether the Senator is in the habit of polishing his glasses when he is in a nervous mood?"

A rather superior smile flashed over my face.

"I assure you that Senator Duffield never wears glasses on any occasion!"

Something like a chuckle came from Madelyn.

"Perhaps you can do as well on another question. You will observe in these newspapers four different photographs of the murdered secretary. Naturally, they bear many points of similarity — they were all taken in the last three years — but they contain one feature in common which puzzles me. Does it impress you in the same way?"

I glanced at the group of photographs doubtfully. Three of them were obviously newspaper "snapshots," taken of the secretary while in the company of Senator Duffield. The fourth was a reproduction of a conventional cabinet photograph. They showed a clean shaven, well built young man of

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thirty or thereabouts; tall, and I should say inclined to athletics. I turned from the newspapers to Madelyn with a shrug.

"I am afraid I don't quite follow you," I admitted ruefully. "There is nothing at all out of the ordinary in any of them that I can catch."

Madelyn carefully clipped the pictures and placed them under the front cover of her black morocco note-book. As she did so, a clock chimed the hour of one. We both pushed back our chairs.

As we stepped into the taxicab, Madelyn tapped my arm. "I wonder if Raymond Rennick polished *his* glasses when he was nervous?" she asked musingly.

III

BOSTON, from the viewpoint of the South Station at half-past seven in the morning, suggests to me a rheumatic individual climbing stiffly out of bed. Boston distinctly resents anything happening before noon. I'll wager that nearly every important event that she has contributed to history occurred after lunch-time!

If Madelyn Mack had expected to have to find her way to the Duffield home without a guide, she was pleasantly disappointed. No less a person than the Senator, himself, was awaiting us at the train-

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gate — a somewhat dishevelled Senator, it must be confessed, with the stubble of a day-old beard showing eloquently how his peace of mind and the routine of his habits had been shattered. As he shook hands with us, he made an obvious attempt to recover something of his ease of manner.

"I trust that you had a pleasant night's rest," he ventured, as he led the way across the station to his automobile.

"Much pleasanter than you had, I fear," replied Madelyn.

The Senator sighed. "As a matter of fact, I found sleep hopeless; I spent most of the night with my cigar. The suggestion of meeting your train came as a really welcome relief."

As we stepped into the waiting motor, a leather-lunged newsboy thrust a bundle of heavy-typed papers into our faces. The Senator whirled with a curt dismissal on his tongue when Madelyn thrust a coin toward the lad and swept a handful of flapping papers into her lap.

"There is absolutely nothing new in the case, Miss Mack, I assure you," the Senator said impatiently. "The reporters have pestered me like so many leeches. The sight of a head-line makes me shiver."

Madelyn bent over her papers without comment. As I settled into the seat by her side, however, and

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the machine whirled around the corner, I saw that she was not even making a pretence of reading. I watched her with a frown as she turned the pages. There was no question of her interest, but it was not the type that held her attention. I doubted if she was perusing a line of the closely-set columns. It was not until she reached the last paper that I solved the mystery. It was the illustrations that she was studying!

When she finished the heap of papers, she began slowly and even more thoughtfully to go through them again. Now I saw that she was pondering the various photographs of Senator Duffield's family that the newspapers had published. I turned away from her bent form and tapping finger, but there was a magnetism in her abstraction that forced my eyes back to her in spite of myself. As my gaze returned to her, she thrust her gloved hand into the recesses of her bag and drew out her black morocco notebook. From its pages she selected the four newspaper pictures of the murdered secretary that she had offered me the night before. With a twinkle of satisfaction, she grouped them about a large, black-bordered picture which stared up at her from the printed page in her lap.

Our ride to the Duffield gate was not a long one. In fact I was so absorbed by my furtive study of Madelyn Mack that I was startled when the chauf-

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feur slackened his speed, and I realized from a straightening of the Senator's bent shoulders that we were nearing our destination.

At the edge of the driveway, a quietly dressed man in a grey suit, who was strolling carelessly back and forth from the gate to the house, eyed us curiously as we passed, and touched his hat to the Senator. I knew at once he was a detective. (Trust a newspaper woman to "spot" a plain clothes man, even if he has left his police uniform at home!) Madelyn did not look up and the Senator made no comment.

As we stepped from the machine, a tall girl with severe, almost classical features and a profusion of nut-brown hair which fell away from her forehead without even the suggestion of a ripple, was awaiting us.

"My daughter, Maria," Senator Duffield announced formally.

Madelyn stepped forward with extended hand. It was evident that Miss Duffield had intended only a brief nod. For an instant she hesitated, with a barely perceptible flush. Then her fingers dropped limply into Madelyn Mack's palm. (I chuckled inwardly at the ill grace with which she did it!)

"This must be a most trying occasion for you," Madelyn said with a note of sympathy in her voice, which made me stare. Effusiveness of any kind

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was so foreign to her nature that I frowned as we followed our host into the wide front drawing room. As we entered by one door, a black-gowned, white-haired woman, evidently Mrs. Duffield, entered by the opposite door.

In spite of the reserve of the society leader, whose sway might be said to extend to three cities, she darted an appealing glance at Madelyn Mack that melted much of the newspaper cynicism with which I was prepared to greet her. Madelyn crossed the room to her side and spoke a low sentence, that I did not catch, as she took her hand. I found myself again wondering at her unwonted friendliness. She was obviously exerting herself to gain the good will of the Duffield household. Why?

A trim maid, who stared at us as though we were museum freaks, conducted us to our rooms — adjoining apartments at the front of the third floor. The identity of Madelyn Mack had already been noised through the house and I caught a saucer-eyed glance from a second servant as we passed down the corridor. If the atmosphere of suppressed curiosity was embarrassing my companion, however, she gave no sign of the fact. Indeed, we had hardly time to remove our hats when the breakfast gong rang.

The family was assembling in the old-fashioned dining-room when we entered. In addition to the

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members of the domestic circle whom I have already indicated, my attention was at once caught by two figures who entered just before us. One was a young woman whom it did not need a second glance to tell me was Beth Duffield. Her white face and swollen eyes were evidence enough of her overwrought condition, and I caught myself speculating why she had left her room.

Her companion was a tall, slender young fellow with just the faintest trace of a stoop in his shoulders. As he turned toward us, I saw a handsome, though self-indulgent face, to a close observer suggesting evidences of more dissipation than was good for its owner. And, if the newspaper stories of the doings of Fletcher Duffield were true, the facial index was a true one. If I remembered rightly, Senator Duffield's son more than once had made prim old Boston town rub her spectacled eyes at the tales of his escapades!

Fletcher Duffield bowed rather abstractedly as he was presented to us, but during the eggs and chops he brightened visibly, and put several curious questions to Madelyn as to her methods of work, which enlivened what otherwise would have been a rather dull half hour.

As the strokes of nine rang through the room, my companion pushed her chair back.

"What time is the coroner's inquest, Senator?"

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Mr. Duffield raised his eyebrows at the change in her attitude "It is scheduled for eleven o'clock."

"And when do you expect Inspector Taylor of headquarters?"

"In the course of an hour, I should say, perhaps less. His man, Martin, has been here since yesterday afternoon — you probably saw him as we drove into the yard. I can telephone Mr. Taylor, if you wish to see him sooner."

"That will hardly be necessary, thank you."

Madelyn walked across to the window. For a moment she stood peering out on to the lawn. Then she stooped, and her hand fumbled with the catch. The window swung open with the noiselessness of well-oiled hinges, and she stepped out on to the veranda, without so much as a glance at the group about the table.

I think the Senator and I rose from our chairs at the same instant. When we reached the window, Madelyn was half across the lawn. Perhaps twenty yards ahead of her, towered a huge maple, rustling in the early morning breeze.

I realized that this was the spot where Raymond Rennick had met his death.

In spite of his nervousness, Senator Duffield did not forget his old-fashioned courtliness, which I believe had become second nature to him. Stepping aside with a slight bow, he held the window open

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for me, following at my shoulder. As we reached the lawn, I saw that the scene of the murder was in plain view from at least one of the principal rooms of the Duffield home.

Madelyn was leaning against the maple when we reached her. Senator Duffield said gravely, as he pointed to the gnarled trunk, "You are standing just at the point where the woman waited, Miss Mack."

"Woman?"

"I refer to the assassin," the Senator rejoined a trifle impatiently. "Judging by our fragmentary clues, she must have been hidden behind the trunk when poor Rennick appeared on the driveway. We found her slipper somewhat to the left of the tree — a matter of eight or ten feet, I should say."

"Oh!" said Madelyn listlessly. I fancied that she was somewhat annoyed that we had followed her.

"An odd clue, that slipper," the Senator continued with an obvious attempt to maintain the conversation. "If we were disposed to be fanciful, it might suggest the childhood legend of Cinderella."

Madelyn did not answer. She stood leaning back against the tree with her eyes wandering about the yard. Once I saw her gaze flash down the driveway

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to the open gate, where the detective, Martin, stood watching us furtively.

"Nora," she said, without turning, "will you kindly walk six steps to your right?"

I knew better than to ask the reason for the request. With a shrug, I faced toward the house, and came to a pause at the end of the stipulated distance.

"Is Miss Noraker standing where Mr. Rennick's body was found, Senator?"

"She will strike the exact spot, I think, if she takes two steps more."

I had hardly obeyed the suggestion when I caught the swift rustle of skirts behind me. I whirled to see Madelyn's lithe form darting toward me with her right hand raised as though it held a weapon.

"Good!" she cried. "I call you to witness, Senator, that I was fully six feet away when she turned! Now I want you to take Miss Noraker's place. The instant you hear me behind you — the *instant*, mind you — I want you to let me know."

She walked back to the tree as the Senator reluctantly changed places with me. I could almost picture the murderess dashing upon her victim as Madelyn bent forward. The Senator turned his back to us with a rather ludicrous air of bewilderment.

My erratic friend had covered perhaps half of the

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distance between her and our host when he spun about with a cry of discovery. She paused with a long breath.

"Thank you, Senator. What first attracted your attention to me?"

"The rustle of your dress, of course!"

Madelyn turned to me with the first smile of satisfaction I had seen since we entered the Duffield gate.

"Was the same true in your case, Nora?"

I nodded. "The fact that you are a woman hopelessly betrayed you. If you had not been hampered by petticoats —"

Madelyn broke in upon my sentence with that peculiar freedom which she always reserves to herself. "There are two things I would like to ask of you, Senator, if I may."

"I am at your disposal, I assure you."

"I would like to borrow a Boston directory, and the services of a messenger."

We walked slowly up the driveway, Madelyn again relapsing into her preoccupied silence and Senator Duffield making no effort to induce her to speak.

IV

We had nearly reached the veranda when there was the sound of a motor at the gate, and a red

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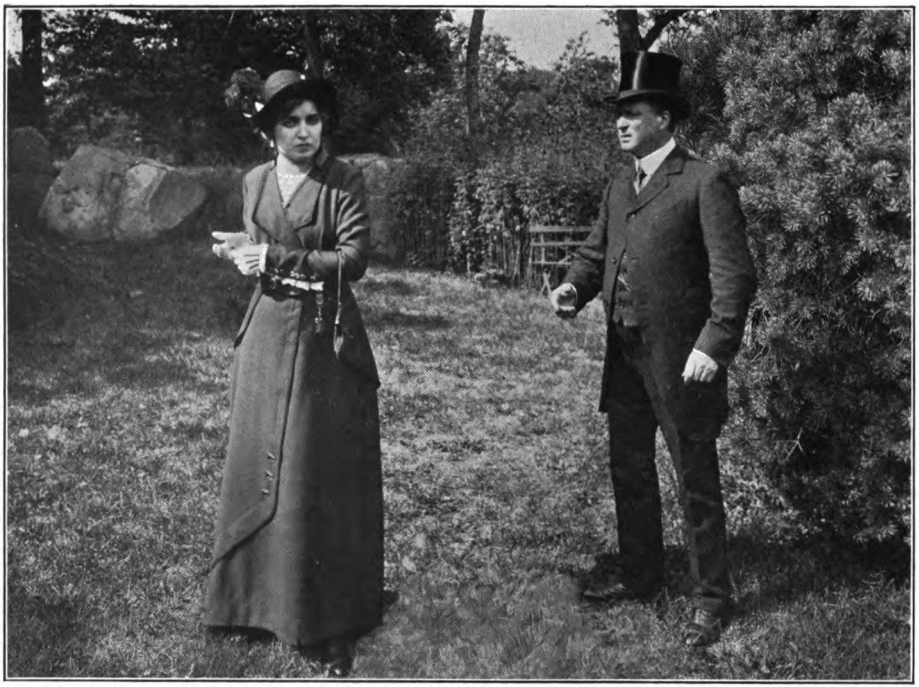

"HE SPUN ABOUT WITH A CRY OF DISCOVERY."

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touring car swept into the yard. An elderly, clean-shaven man, in a long frock coat and a broad-brimmed felt hat, was sharing the front seat with the chauffeur. He sprang to the ground with extended hand as our host stepped forward to greet him. The two exchanged half a dozen low sentences at the side of the machine, and then Senator Duffield raised his voice as they approached us.

"Miss Mack, allow me to introduce my colleague, Senator Burroughs."

"I have heard of you, of course, Miss Mack," the Senator said genially, raising his broad-brimmed hat with a flourish. "I am very glad, indeed, that you are able to give us the benefit of your experience in this, er — unfortunate affair. I presume that it is too early to ask if you have developed a theory?"

"I wonder if you would allow me to reverse the question?" Madelyn responded as she took his hand.

"I fear that my detective ability would hardly be of much service to you, eh, Duffield?"

Our host smiled faintly as he turned to repeat to a servant Madelyn's request for a directory and a messenger. Senator Burroughs folded his arms as his chauffeur circled on toward the garage. There was an odd suggestion of nervousness in the whole group. Or was it fancy?

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"Have you ever given particular study to the legal angle in your cases, Miss Mack?" The question came from Senator Burroughs as we ascended the steps.

"The legal angle? I am afraid I don't grasp your meaning."

The Senator's hand moved mechanically toward his cigar case. "I am a lawyer, and perhaps I argue unduly from a lawyer's viewpoint. We always work from the question of motive, Miss Mack. A professional detective, I believe, — or at least, the average professional detective, — tries to find the criminal first and establish his motive afterward."

"Now, in a case such as this, Senator — "

"In a case such as this, Miss Mack, the trained legal mind would delve first for the motive in Mr. Rennick's assassination."

"And your legal mind, Senator, I presume, has delved for the motive. Has it found it?"

The Senator turned his unlighted cigar reflectively between his lips. "I have not found it! Eliminating the field of sordid passion and insanity, I divide the motives of the murderer under three heads — robbery, jealousy, and revenge. In the present case, I eliminate the first possibility at the outset. There remain then only the two latter."

"You are interesting. You forget, however, a

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fourth motive, — the strongest spur to crime in the human mind!"

Senator Burroughs took his cigar from his mouth.

"I mean the motive of — fear!" Madelyn said abruptly, as she swept into the house. When I followed her, Senator Burroughs had walked over to the railing and stood staring down at the ground below. He had tossed his cigar away.

In the room where we had breakfasted, one of the stable boys stood awkwardly awaiting Madelyn Mack's orders, while John Dorrence, the valet, was just laying a city directory on the table.

"Nora," she said, as she turned to the boy, "will you kindly look up the list of packing houses?"

"Pick out the largest and give me the address," she continued, as I ran my finger through the closely typed pages. With a growing curiosity, I selected a firm whose prestige was advertised in heavy letters. Madelyn's fountain pen scratched a dozen lines across a sheet of her note-book, and she thrust it into an envelope and extended it to the stable lad.

As the youth backed from the room, Senator Duffield appeared at the window.

"I presume it will be possible for me to see Mr. Rennick's body, Senator?" Madelyn Mack asked.

Our host bowed.

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"Also, I would like to look at his clothes — the suit he was wearing at the time of his death, I mean — and, when I am through, I want twenty or thirty minutes alone in his room. If Mr. Taylor should arrive before I am through, will you kindly let me know?"

"I can assure you, Miss Mack, that the police have been through Mr. Rennick's apartment with a microscope."

"Then there can be no objection to my going through it with mine! By the way, Mr. Rennick's glasses — the pair that was found under his body — were packed with his clothes, were they not?"

"Certainly," the Senator responded.

I did not accompany Madelyn into the darkened room where the corpse of the murdered man was reposing. To my surprise, she rejoined me in less than five minutes.

"What did you find?" I queried as we ascended the stairs.

"A five-inch cut just above the sixth rib.

"That is what the newspapers said."

"You are mistaken. They said a three-inch cut. Have you ever tried to plunge a dagger through five inches of human flesh?"

"Certainly not."

"I have."

Accustomed as I was to Madelyn Mack's eccen-

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tricities, I stood stock still and stared into her face.

"Oh, I'm not a murderess! I refer to my dissecting room experiences."

We had reached the upper hall when there was a quick movement at my shoulder, and I saw my companion's hand dart behind my waist. Before I could quite grasp the situation, she had caught my right arm in a grip of steel. For an instant I thought she was trying to force me back down the stairs. Then the force of her hold wrung a low cry of pain from my lips. She released me with a rueful apology.

"Forgive me, Nora! For a woman, I pride myself that I have a strong wrist!"

"Yes, I think you have!"

"Perhaps now you can appreciate what I mean when I say that even I haven't strength enough to inflict the wound that killed Raymond Rennick!"

"Then we must be dealing with an Amazon."

"Would Cinderella's missing slipper fit an Amazon?" she answered drily.

As she finished her sentence, we paused before a closed door which I rightly surmised led into the room of the murdered secretary. Madelyn's hand was on the knob when there was a step behind us, and Senator Duffield joined us with a rough bundle in his hands.

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"Mr. Rennick's clothes," he explained. Madelyn nodded.

"Inspector Taylor left them in my care to hold until the inquest."

Madelyn flung the door open without comment and led the way inside. Slipping the string from the bundle, she emptied the contents out on to the counterpane of the bed. They comprised the usual warm weather outfit of a well-dressed man, who evidently avoided the extremes of fashion, and she deftly sorted the articles into small, neat piles. She glanced up with an expression of impatience.

"I thought you said they were here, Mr. Duffield!"

"What?"

"Mr. Rennick's glasses! Where are they?"

Senator Duffield fumbled in his pocket. "I beg your pardon, Miss Mack. I had overlooked them," he apologized, as he produced a thin paper parcel.

Madelyn carried it to the window and carefully unwrapped it.

"You will find the spectacles rather badly damaged, I fear. One lens is completely ruined."

Madelyn placed the broken glasses on the sill, and raised the blind to its full height. Then she dropped to her knees and whipped out her microscope. When she arose, her small, black-clad figure was tense with suppressed excitement.

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A fat oak chiffonier stood in the corner nearest her. Crossing to its side, she rummaged among the articles that littered its surface, opened and closed the top drawer, and stepped back with an expression of annoyance. A writing table was the next point of her search, with results which I judged to be equally fruitless. She glanced uncertainly from the bed to the three chairs, the only other articles of furniture that the room contained. Then her eyes lighted again as they rested on the broad, carved mantel that spanned the empty fireplace.

It held the usual collection of bric-a-brac of a bachelor's room. At the end farthest from us, however, there was a narrow, red case, of which I caught only an indistinct view when Madelyn's hand closed over it.

She whirled toward us. "I must ask you to leave me alone now, please!"

The Senator flushed at the peremptory command. I stepped into the hall and he followed me, with a shrug. He was closing the door when Madelyn raised her voice. "If Inspector Taylor is below, kindly send him up at once!"

"And what about the inquest, Miss Mack?"

"There will be no inquest — to-day!"

Senator Duffield led the way down stairs without a word. In the hall below, a ruddy-faced man,

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with grey hair, a thin grey beard and moustache, and a grey suit — suggesting any army officer in civilian clothes — was awaiting us. I could readily imagine that Inspector Taylor was something of a disciplinarian in the Boston police department. Also, relying on Madelyn Mack's estimate, he was one of the three shrewdest detectives on the American continent.

Senator Duffield hurried toward him with a suggestion of relief. "Miss Mack is up-stairs, Inspector, and requested me to send you to her the moment you arrived."

"Is she in Mr. Rennick's room?"

The Senator nodded. The Inspector hesitated as though about to ask another question and then, as though thinking better of it, bowed and turned to the stairs.

Inspector Taylor was one of those few policemen who had the honor of being numbered among Madelyn Mack's personal friends, and I fancied that he welcomed the news of her arrival.

Fletcher Duffield was chatting somewhat aimlessly with Senator Burroughs as we sauntered out into the yard again. None of the ladies of the family were visible. The plain clothes man was still lounging disconsolately in the vicinity of the gate. There was a sense of unrest in the scene, a vague expectancy. Although no one voiced the

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suggestion, we might all have been waiting to catch the first clap of distant thunder.

As Senator Duffield joined the men, I wandered across to the dining-room window. I fancied the room was deserted, but I was mistaken. As I faced about toward the driveway, a low voice caught my ear from behind the curtains.

"You are Miss Mack's friend, are you not? No, don't turn around, please!"

But I had already faced toward the open door. At my elbow was a white-capped maid — with her face almost as white as her cap — whom I remembered to have seen at breakfast.

"Yes, I am Miss Mack's friend. What can I do for you?"

"I have a message for her. Will you see that she gets it?"

"Certainly."

"Tell her that I was at the door of Senator Duffield's library the night before the murder."

My face must have expressed my bewilderment. For an instant I fancied the girl was about to run from the room. I stepped through the window and put my arm about her shoulders. She smiled faintly.

"I don't know much about the law, and evidence, and that sort of thing — and I am afraid! You will take care of me, won't you?"

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"Of course, I will, Anna. Your name is Anna, isn't it?"

The girl was rapidly recovering her self possession. "I thought you ought to know what happened Tuesday night. I was passing the door of the library — it was fairly late, about ten o'clock, I think — when I heard a man's voice inside the room. It was a loud, angry voice like that of a person in a quarrel. Then I heard a second voice, lower and much calmer."

"Did you recognize the speakers?"

"They were Mr. Rennick and Senator Duffield!"

I caught my breath. "You said one of them was angry. Which was it?"

"Oh, it was the Senator! He was very much excited and worked up. Mr. Rennick seemed to be speaking very low."

"What were they saying, Anna?" I tried to make my tones careless and indifferent, but they trembled in spite of myself.

"I couldn't catch what Mr. Rennick said. The Senator was saying some dreadful things. I remember he cried, 'You swindlers!' And then a bit later 'I have evidence that should put you and your thieving crew behind the bars!' I think that is all. I was too bewildered to —"

A stir on the lawn interrupted the sentence.

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Madelyn Mack and Inspector Taylor had appeared. At the sound of their voices, the girl broke from my arm and darted toward the door.

Through the window, I heard the Inspector's heavy tones, as he announced curtly, "I am telephoning the coroner, Senator, that we are not ready for the inquest to-day. We must postpone it until to-morrow."

V

THE balance of the day passed without incident. In fact, I found the subdued quiet of the Duffield home becoming irksome as evening fell. I saw little of Madelyn Mack. She disappeared shortly after luncheon behind the door of her room, and I did not see her again until the dressing bell rang for dinner. Senator Duffield left for the city with Mr. Burroughs at noon, and his car did not bring him back until dark. The women of the family remained in their apartments during the entire day, nor could I wonder at the fact. A morbid crowd of curious sight-seers was massed about the gates almost constantly, and it was necessary to send a call for two additional policemen to keep them back. In spite of the vigilance, frequent groups of newspaper men managed to slip into the grounds, and, after half a dozen experiences in frantically

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dodging a battery of cameras, I decided to stick to the shelter of the house.

It was with a feeling of distinct relief that I heard the door of Madelyn's room open and her voice calling to me to enter. I found her stretched on a lounge before the window, with a mass of pillows under her head.

"Been asleep?" I asked.

"No — to tell the truth, I've been too busy."

"What? In this room!"

"This is the first time I've been here since noon!"

"Then where —"

"Nora, don't ask questions!"

I turned away with a shrug that brought a laugh from the lounge. Madelyn rose and shook out her skirts. I sat watching her as she walked across to the mirror and stood patting the great golden masses of her hair.

A low tap on the door interrupted her. Dorrence, the valet, stood outside as she opened it, extending an envelope. Madelyn fumbled it as she walked back. She let the envelope flutter to the floor and I saw that it contained only a blank sheet of paper. She thrust it into her pocket without explanation.

"How would you like a long motor ride, Nora?"

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"For business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure! The day's work is finished! I don't know whether you agree with me or not, but I am strongly of the opinion that a whirl out under the elms of Cambridge, and then on to Concord and Lexington would be delightful in the moonlight. What do you say?"

The clock was hovering on the verge of midnight and the household had retired when we returned. Madelyn was in singularly cheery spirits. The low refrain which she was humming as the car swung into the grounds — "Schubert's Serenade," I think it was — ceased only when we stepped on to the veranda, and realized that we were entering the house of the dead.

I turned off my lights in silence, and glanced undecidedly from the bed to the rocker by the window. The cool night breeze beckoned me to the latter, and I drew the chair back a pace and cuddled down among the cushions. The lawn was almost silver under the flood of the moonlight, recalling vaguely the sweep of the ocean on a midsummer night. Back and forth along the edge of the gate the figure of a man was pacing like a tired sentinel. It was the plain-clothes officer from headquarters. His figure suggested a state of siege. We might have been surrounded by a skulking enemy. Or was the enemy within, and the sentinel

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stationed to prevent his escape? I stumbled across to the bed and to sleep, with the question echoing oddly through my brain.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was throwing a yellow shaft of light across my bed, but it wasn't the sun that had awakened me. Madelyn was standing in the doorway, dressed, with an expression on her face which brought me to my elbow.

"What has happened now?"

"Burglars!"

"Burglars?" I repeated dully.

"I am going down to the library. Some one is making news for us fast, Nora! When will it be our turn?"

I dressed in record-breaking time, with my curiosity whetted by sounds of suppressed excitement which forced their way into the upper hall. The Duffield home not only was early astir, but was rudely jarred out of its customary routine.

When I descended, I found a nervous group of servants clustered about the door of the library. They stood aside to let me pass, with attitudes of uneasiness which I surmised would mean a wholesale series of "notices" if the strange events in the usually well regulated household continued.

Behind the closed door of the library were Senator Duffield, his son, Fletcher, and Madelyn Mack. It was easy to appreciate at a glance the unusual

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condition of the room. At the right, one of the long windows, partly raised, showed the small, round hole of a diamond cutter just over the latch. It was obvious where the clandestine entrance and exit had been obtained. The most noticeable feature of the apartment, however, was a small, square safe in the corner, with its heavy lid swinging awkwardly ajar, and the rug below littered with a heap of papers, that had evidently been torn from its neatly tabulated series of drawers. The burglarious hands either had been very angry or very much in a hurry. Even a number of unsealed envelopes had been ripped across, as though the pillager had been too impatient to extract their contents in the ordinary manner. To a man of Senator Duffield's methodical habits, it was easy to imagine that the scene had been a severe wrench.

Madelyn was speaking in her quick, incisive tones as I entered.

"Are you quite sure of that fact, Senator?" she asked sharply, as I closed the door and joined the trio.

"Quite sure, Miss Mack!"

"Then nothing is missing, absolutely nothing?"

"Not a single article, valuable or otherwise!"

"I presume then there were articles of more or less value in the safe?"

"There was perhaps four hundred dollars in

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loose bills in my private cash drawer, and, so far as I know, there is not a dollar gone."

"How about your papers and memoranda?"

The Senator shook his head.

"There was nothing of the slightest use to a stranger. As a matter of fact, just two days ago, I took pains to destroy the only portfolio of valuable documents in the safe."

Madelyn stooped thoughtfully over the litter of papers on the rug. "You mean three evenings ago, don't you?"

"How on earth, Miss Mack—"

"You refer to the memoranda that you and Mr. Rennick were working on the night before his death, do you not?"

"Of course!" And then I saw Senator Duffield was staring at his curt questioner as though he had said something he hadn't meant to.

"I think you told me once before that the combination of your safe was known only to yourself and Mr. Rennick?"

"You are correct."

"Then, to your knowledge, you are the only living person who possesses this information at the present time?"

"That is the case. It was a rather intricate combination, and we changed it hardly a month ago."

Madelyn rose from the safe, glanced reflectively

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at a huge leather chair, and sank into its depths with a sigh.

"You say nothing has been stolen, Senator, that the burglar's visit yielded him nothing. For your peace of mind, I would like to agree with you, but I am sorry to inform you that you are mistaken."

"Surely, Miss Mack, you are hasty! I am confident that I have searched my possessions with the utmost care."

"Nevertheless, you have been robbed!"

Senator Duffield glanced down at her small, lithe figure impatiently. "Then, perhaps, you will be good enough to tell me of what my loss consists?"

"I refer to the article for which your secretary was murdered! It was stolen from this room last night."

Had the point of a dagger pressed against Senator Duffield's shoulders, he could not have bounded forward in greater consternation. His composure was shattered like a pane of glass crumbling.

He sprang toward the safe with a cry like a man in sudden fear or agony. Jerking back its door, he plunged his hand into its lower left compartment. When he straightened, he held a long, wax phonograph record.

His dismay had vanished in a quick blending of relief and anger, as his eyes swept from the cylinder to the grave figure of Madelyn Mack.

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"I fail to appreciate your joke, Miss Mack — if you call it a joke to frighten a man without cause as you have me!"

"Have you examined the record in your hand, Senator?"

Fletcher Duffield and I stared at the two. There was a suggestion of tragedy in the scene as the impatience and irritation gradually faded from the Senator's face.

"It is a substitute!" he groaned. "A substitute! I have been tricked, victimized, robbed!"

He stood staring at the wax record as though it were a heated iron burning into his flesh. Suddenly it slipped from his fingers and was shattered on the floor.

But he did not appear to notice the fact as he burst out, "Do you realize that you are standing here inactive while the thief is escaping? I don't know how your wit surprised my secret, and don't care now, but you are throwing away your chances of stopping the burglar while he may be putting miles between himself and us! Are you made of ice, woman? Can't you appreciate what this means? In the name of heaven, Miss Mack —"

"The thief will not escape, Mr. Duffield!"

"It seems to me that he has already escaped."

"Let me assure you, Senator, that your missing

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property is as secure as though it were locked in your safe at this moment!"

"But do you realize that, once a hint of its nature is known, it will be almost worthless to me?"

"Better perhaps than you do, — so well that I pledge myself to return it to your hands within the next half hour!"

Senator Duffield took three steps forward until he stood so close to Madelyn that he could have reached over and touched her on the shoulder.

"I am an old man, Miss Mack, and the last two days have brought me almost to a collapse. If I have appeared unduly sharp, I tender you my apologies — but do not give me false hopes! Tell me frankly that you cannot encourage me. It will be a kindness. You will realize that I cannot blame you."

Senator Duffield's imperious attitude was so broken that I could hardly believe it possible that the same man who ruled a great political party, almost by the swaying of his finger, was speaking. Madelyn caught his hand with a grasp of assurance.

"I will promise even more." She snapped open her watch. "If you will return to this room at nine o'clock, not only will I restore your stolen property — but I will deliver the murderer of Raymond Rennick!"

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"Rennick's murderer?" the Senator gasped.

Madelyn bowed. "In this room at nine o'clock."

I think I was the first to move toward the door. Fletcher Duffield hesitated a moment, staring at Madelyn; then he turned and hurried past me down the hall.

His father followed more slowly. As he closed the door, I saw Madelyn standing where we had left her, leaning back against her chair, and staring at a woman's black slipper. It was the one which had been found by Raymond Rennick's dead body.

I made my way mechanically toward the dining-room, and was surprised to find that the members of the Duffield family were already at the table. With the exception of Madelyn, it was the same breakfast group as the morning before. In another house, this attempt to maintain the conventions in the face of tragedy might have seemed incongruous; but it was so thoroughly in keeping with the self-contained Duffield character that, after the first shock, I realized it was not at all surprising. I fancy that we all breathed a sigh of relief, however, when the meal was over.

We were rising from the table, when a folded note, addressed to the Senator, was handed to the butler from the hall. He glanced through it hurriedly, and held up his hand for us to wait.

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"This is from Miss Mack. She requests me to have all of the members of the family, and those servants who have furnished any evidence in connection with the, er — murder" — the Senator winced as he spoke the word — "to assemble in the library at nine o'clock. I think that we owe it both to ourselves and to her to obey her instructions to the letter. Perkins, will you kindly notify the servants?"

As it happened, Madelyn's audience in the library was increased by two spectators she had not named. The tooting of a motor sounded without, and the tall figure of Senator Burroughs met us as we were leaving the dining-room. Senator Duffield took his arm with a glance of relief, and explained the situation as he forced him to accompany us.

VI

In the library, we found for the first time that Madelyn was not alone. Engaged in a low conversation with her, which ceased as we entered, was Inspector Taylor. He had evidently been designated as the spokesman of the occasion.

"Is everybody here?" he asked.

"I think so," Senator Duffield replied. "There are really only five of the servants who count in the case."

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Madelyn's eyes flashed over the circle. "Close the door, please, Mr. Taylor. I think you had better lock it also."

"There are fourteen persons in this room," she continued, "counting, of course, Inspector Taylor, Miss Noraker and myself. We may safely be said to be outside the case. There are then eleven persons here connected in some degree with the tragedy. It is in this list of eleven that I have searched for the murderer. I am happy to tell you that my search has been successful!"

Senator Duffield was the first to speak. "You mean to say, Miss Mack, that the murderer is in this room at the present time?"

"Correct."

"Then you accuse one of this group —"

"Of dealing the blow which killed your secretary, and, later, of plundering your safe."

Inspector Taylor moved quietly to a post between the two windows. Escape from the room was barred. I darted a stealthy glance around the circle in an effort to surprise a trace of guilt in the faces before me, and was startled to find my neighbors engaged in the same furtive occupation. Of the women of the family, the Senator's wife had compressed her lips as though, as the mistress of the house, she felt the need of maintaining her composure in any situation, Maria was toying with

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her bracelet, while Beth made no effort to conceal her agitation.

Senator Burroughs was studying the pattern of the carpet with a face as inscrutable as a mask. Fletcher Duffield was sitting back in his chair, his hands in his pockets. His father was leaning against the locked door, his eyes flashing from face to face. With the exception of Dorrence, the valet, and Perkins, the butler, who I do not think would have been stirred out of their stolidness had the ceiling fallen, the servants were in an utter panic. Two of the maids were plainly bordering on hysterics.

Such was the group that faced Madelyn in the Duffield library. One of the number was a murderer, whom the next ten minutes were to brand as such. Which was it? Instinctively my eyes turned again toward the three women of the Duffield family, as Madelyn walked across to a portiere which screened a corner of the apartment.

Jerking it aside, she showed, suspended from a hook in the ceiling, a quarter of fresh veal.

On an adjoining stand was a long, thin-bladed knife, which might have been a dagger, ground to a razor-edge. Madelyn held it before her as she turned to us.

"This is the weapon which killed Mr. Rennick."

I fancied I heard a gasp as she spoke. Although

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I whirled almost on the instant, however, I could detect no signs of it in the faces behind me.

"I propose to conduct a short experiment, which I assure you is absolutely necessary to my chain of reasoning," Madelyn continued. "You may or may not know that the body of a calf practically offers the same degree of resistance to a knife as the body of a man. Dead flesh, of course, is harder and firmer than living flesh, but I think that, adding the thickness of clothes, we may take it for granted that in the quarter of veal before us, we have a fair substitute for the body of Raymond Rennick. Now watch me closely, please!"

Drawing back her arm, she plunged her knife into the meat with a force which sent it spinning on its hook. She drew the knife out, and examined it reflectively.

"I have made a cut of only a little more than three and a half inches. The blow which killed Mr. Rennick penetrated at least five inches.

"Here we encounter a singularly striking feature of our case, involving a stratagem which I think I can safely say is the most unique in my experience. To all intents, it was a woman who killed Mr. Rennick. In fact, it has been taken for granted that he met his death at the hand of a female assassin. We must dispose of this conclusion at the outset, for the simple reason that it was

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physically impossible for a woman to have dealt the death blow!"

I chanced to be gazing directly at Fletcher Duffield as Madelyn made the statement. An expression of such relief flashed into his face that instinctively I turned about and followed the direction of his glance. His eyes were fixed on his sister, Beth.

Madelyn deposited the knife on the stand.

"Indeed, I may say there are few men — perhaps not one in ten — with a wrist strong enough to have dealt Mr. Rennick's death blow," she went on. "There is only one such person among the fourteen in this room at the present time.

"Again you will recall that the wound was delivered from the rear just as Mr. Rennick faced about in his own defense. Had he been attacked by a woman, he would have heard the rustle of her dress several feet before she possibly could have reached him. I think you will recall my demonstration of that fact yesterday morning, Mr. Duffield.

"Obviously then, it is a man whom we must seek if we would find the murderer of your secretary, and a man of certain peculiar characteristics. Two of these I can name now. He possessed a wrist developed to an extraordinary degree, and he owned feet as small and shapely as a woman's.

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Otherwise, the stratagem of wearing a woman's slippers and leaving one of them near the scene of the crime to divert suspicion from himself, would never have occurred to him!"

Again I thought I heard a gasp behind me, but its owner escaped me a second time.

"There was a third marked feature among the physical characteristics of the murderer. He was near-sighted — so much so that it was necessary for him to wear glasses of the kind known technically as a 'double lens.' Unfortunately for the assassin, when his victim fell, the latter caught the glasses in his hand and they were broken under his body. The murderer may have been thrown into a panic, and feared to take the time to recover his spectacles; but it was a fatal blunder. Fortune, however, might have helped him even then in spite of this fact, for those who found the body fell into the natural error of considering the glasses to be the property of the murdered man. Had it not been for two minor details, this impression might never have been contradicted."

Madelyn held up a packet of newspaper illustrations. Several of them I recognized as the pictures of the murdered secretary that she had shown me at the "Roanoke." The others were also photographs of the same man.

"If Mr. Rennick hadn't been fond of having his

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picture taken, the fact that he never wore glasses on the street might not have been noticed. None of his pictures, not even the snap-shots, showed a man in spectacles. It is true that he did possess a pair, and it is here where those who discovered the crime went astray. But they were for reading purposes only, the kind termed a .125 lens, while those of his assailant were a .210 lens. To clinch the matter, I later found Mr. Rennick's own spectacles in his room where he had left them the evening before."

Madelyn held up the red leather case she had found on the mantel-piece, and tapped it musingly as she gave a slight nod to Inspector Taylor.

"We have now the following description of the murderer — a slenderly built man, with an unusual wrist, possibly an athlete at one time, who possesses a foot capable of squeezing into a woman's shoe, and who is handicapped by near-sightedness. Is there an individual in this room to whom this description applies?"

There was a new glitter in Madelyn's eyes as she continued.

"Through the co-operation of Inspector Taylor, I am enabled to answer this question. Mr. Taylor has traced the glasses of the assassin to the optician who gave the prescription for them. I am not surprised to find that the owner of the spectacles tallies

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with the owner of these other interesting articles."

With the words, she whisked from the stand at her elbow, the long, narrow-bladed dagger, and a pair of soiled, black suede slippers.

There was a suggestion of grotesque unreality about it all. It was much as though I had been viewing the denouement of a play from the snug vantage point of an orchestra seat, waiting for the lights to flare up and the curtain to ring down. A shriek ran through my ears, jarring me back to the realization that I was not a spectator, but a part, of the play.

A figure darted toward the window. It was John Dorrence, the valet.

The next instant Inspector Taylor threw himself on the fleeing man's shoulders, and the two went to the floor.

"Can you manage him?" Madelyn called.

"Unless he prefers cold steel through his body to cold steel about his wrists," was the rejoinder.

"I think you may dismiss the other servants, Senator," Madelyn said. "I wish, however, that the family would remain a few moments."

As the door closed again, she continued, "I promised you also, Senator, the return of your stolen property. I have the honor to make that promise good."

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From her stand, which was rapidly assuming the proportions of a conjurer's table, she produced a round, brown paper parcel.

"Before I unwrap this, have I your permission to explain its contents?"

"As you will, Miss Mack."

"Perhaps the most puzzling feature of the tragedy is the motive. It is this parcel which supplies us with the answer.

"Your secretary, Mr. Duffield, was an exceptional young man. Not only did he repeatedly resist bribery such as comes to few men, but he gave his life for his trust.

"At any time since this parcel came into his possession, he could have sold it for a fortune. Because he refused to sell it, he was murdered for it. Perhaps every reader of the newspapers is more or less familiar with Senator Duffield's investigations of the ravages of a certain great Trust. A few days ago, the Senator came into possession of evidence against the combine of such a drastic nature that he realized it would mean nothing less than the annihilation of the monopoly, imprisonment for the chief officers, and a business sensation such as this country has seldom known.

"Once the officers of the Trust knew of his evidence, however, they would be fore-armed in such

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a manner that its value would be largely destroyed. The evidence was a remarkable piece of detective work. It consisted of a phonographic record of a secret directors' meeting, laying bare the inmost depredations of the corporation."

Madelyn paused as the handcuffed valet showed signs of a renewed struggle. Inspector Taylor without comment calmly snapped a second pair of bracelets about his feet.

"The Trust was shrewd enough to appreciate the value of a spy in the Duffield home. Dorrence was engaged for the post, and from what I have learned of his character, he filled it admirably. How he stumbled on Senator Duffield's latest *coup* is immaterial. The main point is that he tried to bribe Mr. Rennick so persistently to betray his post that the latter threatened to expose him. Partly in the fear that he would carry out his threat, and partly in the hope that he carried memoranda which might lead to the discovery of the evidence that he sought, Dorrence planned and carried out the murder.

"In the secretary's pocket he discovered the combination of the safe, and made use of it last night. I found the stolen phonograph record this morning behind the register of the furnace pipe in Dorrence's room. I had already found that this was his cache, containing the dagger which killed

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Rennick, and the second of Cinderella's slippers. The pair was stolen some days ago from the room of Miss Beth Duffield."

The swirl of the day was finally over. Dorrence had been led to his cell; the coroner's jury had returned its verdict; and all that was mortal of Raymond Rennick had been laid in its last resting place.

Madelyn and I had settled ourselves in the homeward bound Pullman as it rumbled out of the Boston station in the early dusk.

"There are two questions I want to ask," I said reflectively.

Madelyn looked up from her newspaper with a yawn.

"Why did John Dorrence bring you back a blank sheet of paper when you dispatched him on your errand?"

"As a matter of fact, there was nothing else for him to bring back. Mr. Taylor kept him at police headquarters long enough to give me time to carry my search through his room. The message was a blind."

"And what was the quarrel that the servant girl, Anna, heard in the Duffield library?"

"It wasn't a quarrel, my dear girl. It was the Senator preparing the speech with which he in-

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tended to launch his evidence against the Trust. The Senator is in the habit of dictating his speeches to a phonograph. Some of them, I am afraid, are rather fiery."

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IV

THE BULLET FROM NOWHERE

I

LOUDER and louder, as though the musician had abandoned himself to the wild spirit of his crashing climax, the pealing strains of the "storm scene" from "William Tell" rolled out from the keys of the mahogany piano, through the closed doors of Homer Hendricks' music-room, and down the stairs to the waiting group below.

The slender, white fingers of the musician quivered with feverish energy. Into his thin, pale face, white with the pallor of midnight studies, crept two dull spots of hectic color. His eyes glistened with the gleam of the inspired artist, who behind the printed music sees the soul of the composer.

Save only for his short, pompadoured red hair, bristling above his forehead like a stiff, wiry brush, and his chin, too square and stubborn for a dreamer, Homer Hendricks, who made the law his profession and music his recreation, presented all of the characteristics of the picturesque genius.

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The group in the library had crowded close to the hall door, as though fearing to miss a note in the rolling climax from the piano above. Montague Weston, tossing his neglected cigarette aside, was the first to break the spell.

"He's a wonder!" he breathed.

The girl in white at his elbow glanced toward him with swift enthusiasm.

"Doubly so! To think that a man who can make music like that is also rated as the leading corporation lawyer in the State!"

Weston shrugged. "Yes, he calls his piano only his plaything."

The girl lowered her voice. "Is it true — you know this is my first visit here — that he is as eccentric as we read in those sensational newspaper articles?"

A slow smile broke over Weston's face. "That depends on your idea of eccentricity, Miss Morrison. Some persons, for instance, might deem his present performance the height of oddity. Hendricks never plays except when he is alone in his own music-room with the door closed!"

"Really!" The girl's eyes were wide with her amazement.

"And again" — Weston was evidently enjoying the other's naive curiosity — "the fact that Mr. Hendricks has condescended to join our theater

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party to-night suggests another of his peculiarities. I believe this is the first evening in ten years that he has left his piano before midnight! But then this is a special occasion."

"Hilda Wentworth's birthday?" the girl interjected.

Weston nodded.

"All of the affection of a lonely bachelor without a domestic circle of his own is bound up in Homer Hendricks' love for his niece. And I happen to know, Miss Morrison, how very much alone such a man can be!"

At the wistful note in Weston's voice, the vivacious Miss Morrison glanced away quickly.

"I should not think *that* would apply to your case!" she said lightly. "If all reports are true, Monty Weston has won almost as great a reputation as a heart-breaker as he has as a trust-breaker!"

"You flatter both my social and my legal ability!" Weston laughed. He glanced at his watch. "By Jove, it's after eight! Where are Hilda and Bob Grayson?"

He turned so suddenly as he put the question that his companion gazed at him in surprise. The second of the two women in the group, Muriel Thornton, smiled shrewdly.

"Hilda went up-stairs a moment ago," she vol-

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unteered. "As for Bob," she paused significantly as the shadow deepened on Weston's face. "Where *is* Bob?" she added artlessly.

The rivalry of Weston and Grayson, the struggling young architect, for the favors of Hilda Wentworth had too long been a matter of gossip for the point of the question to pass unnoticed.

Wilkins, the fourth member of the group, essayed an eager answer in the pause that followed.

"Bob had a business engagement in his rooms, I believe, and left directly after dinner. He was to have been back by eight, though."

Up-stairs, the music still continued. Homer Hendricks had reached the finale of the overture, and Rossini's majestic strains were rolling out with the sweep of a lashing surf.

Weston strolled to the door.

"'William Tell' is nearing the end, I fancy. Listen!"

The speaker was right. It was the end — but not the end that either the musician or his audience were expecting.

Above the crash of the music rang out the sudden, muffled report of a revolver!

From the piano came a long, echoing discord, as though the player's arm had fallen heavily to the keys.

And then silence — a silence so intense that the

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low breathing of the group in the library, stricken suddenly motionless, sounded with strange distinctness!

For a moment the quartet stood staring at one another, helpless, dumb, under the spell of an overwhelming bewilderment.

Miss Morrison fell back against the wall, panting like a frightened deer, her eyes staring up the winding stairway as though they would pierce the closed door above and see — what?

Of the two men, Weston was the prompter to act.

Jerking his companion by the elbow as though to arouse him to the necessity of the situation, he sprang out of the doorway, taking the steps to the second floor two at a bound.

John Wilkins, glancing hesitatingly at the women, followed more slowly at his shoulder.

From the end of the upper hall came the sound of running steps as the men reached it. A tall, slight, fair-haired girl, in a green satin evening gown, clutched Weston's arm with a wild, questioning stare.

For the first time Wilkins sensed the spell of tragedy. In the girl's eyes was a gleam of undisguised terror.

"The shot?" she burst out. "It came from —"

Weston nodded shortly, even curtly, as he jerked

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his head toward the door of the music-room, still closed, and followed the motion with a quick step. Wilkins reached forward and touched the girl's shoulder awkwardly.

"Don't you think I had better escort you below, Miss Wentworth?"

The girl shook off his fingers impatiently.

Weston's hand was on the knob of the music-room door. He turned it abruptly. A puzzled frown swept his face, and he turned it again more violently. The door was locked.

Hilda Wentworth darted to his side, tearing his hand away almost fiercely and beating the panels sharply with her knuckles.

"Uncle! Uncle! It is I, Hilda!"

The silence was unbroken.

The girl redoubled her efforts, tearing at the wood with her fingers and raising her voice almost to a shriek.

Then of a sudden she stepped back, turned with a low, gasping wail, and sank into the arms of a tall, broad-shouldered young man with the build of an athlete, who sprang up the stairs past Wilkins' hesitating figure just in time to catch her.

Weston glanced at the newcomer with a swift hardening of his lips. "Lend a hand here, Grayson!" he jerked out. "We've got to break in this door!"

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"In Heaven's name, why?"

"No time for questions, man!" Weston's tones were curt. "Hendricks is in there. We heard a shot. We don't —"

"A shot?"

The words might have been a spur. The speaker lowered the body of the fainting girl to the floor, and sprang to the door with a vigor that made the others stare in spite of the tension of the moment.

Poising himself for an instant, he launched his body toward the oaken panels. There was a sharp splintering of wood.

Weston muttered a low cry of satisfaction and joined him in a second assault. The door shivered on its hinges.

The girl on the floor raised herself on her elbow and watched the two with a white, strained face.

The men drew back with muscles taut and hurled themselves a third time toward the barrier.

II

THIS time the attack was successful. The door fell inward so abruptly that they were thrown to their knees.

Before they could rise, a satin-clad figure sprang past them from the hall and threw itself with a cry

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on the body of a man in evening clothes, huddled on the floor.

Just above his left ear showed a gaping bullet-hole, from which a thin stream of blood was already trickling down on to the rug beneath him.

His eyes were fixed in a ghastly stare which permitted no second question as to his condition. Homer Hendricks was dead!

Weston raised the girl to her feet with the commanding gesture of a strong-minded man in a sudden emergency.

"Hilda — Miss Wentworth — you must let us take you down-stairs. This is no place for you."

"Oh, Uncle! Poor Uncle!" sobbed the girl unheeding.

Weston darted a swift glance around the room and toward the stairs. The women below were evidently not yet aware of the situation.

Wilkins from the hall was surveying the scene like a man in a nightmare, with a face from which every vestige of color had fled.

Grayson was still standing by the shattered door, with his hands clenched as though in a quick, nervous spasm.

At Weston's words he approached the girl with an added sentence of entreaty.

She nodded dully, flashed a last, despairing glance

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at the body on the floor, and suffered him to take her arm without resistance.

There was a certain suggestion of intimacy in the action, which brought a sudden scowl to Weston's features, as he said crisply:

"Of course, Grayson, you will explain to the ladies. As for the rest of it, you had better have them remain until —"

"The police?" Grayson finished inquiringly. "Shall I telephone?"

Weston hesitated, with a glance at Wilkins. The latter was still maintaining his position in the doorway as though fearing to enter.

"The police?" he repeated huskily. His eyes were riveted on the body of Hendricks as though held by a magnet. "I — I suppose so. This is awful, gentlemen!"

The attitude of the three men in the face of the sudden tragedy was curiously suggestive of their characters — Weston, with the crisply directing demeanor of the man accustomed to leadership; Grayson, frankly bewildered, with his attention centered on the girl's distress rather than the harsher features of the situation; Wilkins, passively content to allow another to direct his actions.

Hilda Wentworth gathered up her skirts and gently released herself from Grayson's hand.

In her face was a forced calmness, to a close

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observer more expressive of inward suffering than even her first outburst of grief.

As Grayson made a move to follow her, she turned with a low sentence. "I would prefer that you stay here, Bob!"

Her inflection, and the glance which accompanied it, brought another swiftly veiled scowl to Weston's face. He strode to the end of the room and did not turn until Wilkins had led Miss Wentworth to the stairs.

Grayson, in the center of the apartment, had dug his hands into his trousers-pockets and was watching him curiously.

"A beastly bad business, Bob!" Weston spoke nervously, in odd contrast to his former curt tones.

Grayson jerked his head almost imperceptibly toward the motionless body on the carpet.

"What on earth made him do it?"

"*Him* do it?" There was an obvious note of surprise in Weston's voice. "Heavens, Bob, can't you see it's not — not *that?*"

Grayson recoiled as from a blow.

"Not suicide?" His tone raised itself with a shrill suddenness. "Why, man, it must be! You don't mean, you can't mean —"

Weston lifted his eyebrows questioningly. "Do men shoot themselves without a weapon, Bob?"

Grayson sprang abruptly past the other, stooped

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swiftly over the silent form of Homer Hendricks, and turned his eyes fiercely across the adjacent stretch of carpet.

Weston watched him somberly.

"Are you convinced?" he queried at length.

Grayson pushed back the only chair in that end of the room, saw that it concealed nothing, and then, seizing an end of the elaborately carved piano, in front of which the body of the dead man rested, tugged until he forced it an inch from the wall.

His eyes swept the crack thus exposed, and he stepped back with a gesture of bewilderment.

"Have you found it?" Weston ventured. There was the barest trace of a sneer in his voice.

Grayson sprang across at him and clutched his shoulder.

"The weapon, man! Where is it? I say it *must* be here!"

Weston glanced at the other's flushed features calmly.

"I told you, Bob, there was none. Or, perhaps, you think that a dead man can rise to his feet and toss the gun that has ended his life out of the window?"

"The window?" Grayson muttered. Weston's sneer escaped him.

Darting to the three windows of the music-room, he flung back the drawn curtains of each in turn.

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They were all locked, and neither the glass nor the curtains showed a mark of disturbance.

Weston followed his movements with folded arms.

"There is still the door, Bob. And remember that is the only other possible exit." He hesitated. "If you will take the trouble to raise it from the floor, you will discover a fact which I learned some minutes ago. The key was turned from the *inside* and not from the *outside!*"

Grayson glanced at the other for a long moment in silence; then, stepping across the carpet with the resolution of a man determined to accept only the evidence of his own eyes, he raised the shattered panels until the lock was exposed.

The key, bent by the force of the fall, was still firmly fixed on the inward side of the door!

Grayson rose from his knees like a man groping in a brain-whirling maze.

"Sit down, Bob!" Weston pushed across a chair and forced the other into it. "We've got to face this thing coolly."

"Coolly!" Grayson's voice rose almost to a hysterical laugh. "Good Heavens! Are you a man or a machine? You tell me that Hendricks did not kill himself —"

"Could not!" Weston corrected in a level tone.

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"And now," Grayson burst on unheeding, "you show me that he was not —"

"Murdered?" Weston completed calmly. "That is where you are wrong. I have shown you no such inference!"

Grayson passed his hand wearily over his brow.

"We are not dealing with spirits, man! You forget that the windows are fastened, the door locked —"

"I forget nothing!" said Weston coldly.

Grayson kicked back his chair impatiently. "Then, if Hendricks' murderer has not vanished into thin air, how —"

"That, my dear boy," said Weston softly, "is a question which these gentlemen may be able to answer for us!"

As he spoke, he motioned toward the hall.

Wilkins had appeared at the head of the stairs with two newcomers, both of whom were obviously policemen, although only one was in uniform.

Wilkins paused awkwardly at the door, with his hand on the shoulder of the man in civilian clothes.

"Lieutenant Perry, of headquarters," he announced formally, "Mr. Weston and Mr. Grayson!"

Weston extended his hand with a subtle suggestion of deference which brought a gratified flush to the officer's face.

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He was a short, stocky, round-headed man with all of the evidences of the stubborn police bulldog, although the suggestion of any pronounced mental ability was lacking.

His eyes swept the body of the dead man and the details of the room with professional stoicism. Motioning to his companion, he knelt over Hendricks' stiffening form.

"Bullet entered at the left ear," he muttered. "Death probably instantaneous!" He straightened with the conventional police frown. "Where's the weapon, gentlemen?"

Grayson was silent, content that Weston should act as spokesman. The latter flung out his hands.

"We thought you could find it for us!" he answered shortly.

"Then you have not found it?" There was a flash of suspicion in the lieutenant's voice.

"We have not!"

The lieutenant jotted down a scrawling line in his note-book.

"Are we to believe this murder, then?" he rasped.

"I should prefer that you draw your own conclusions, Lieutenant!"

For an instant the officer's pencil was poised in the air, then he closed his note-book with a jerk, thrust his pencil into his pocket, and walked quickly

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to the closed windows, and then to the door. A growing coldness was apparent in every movement.

"Help me here, Burke!" he snapped to his subordinate. "Stand back, gentlemen!" he continued with almost a growl as Weston made a motion as though to assist.

The next moment the broken door was raised slowly back against the wall. The lieutenant's eyes fell on the lock with the twisted key. With a grimness he did not attempt to conceal, he whirled on the two men behind him.

"What kind of a yarn are you trying to give me?" His hand pointed first to the locked door and then to the fastened windows. "Do you think I was born yesterday? Come, gents, out with the truth!"

"The truth?" said Weston curtly.

The lieutenant bristled. "Just so — and the sooner you let me have it the better for all parties concerned! First you tell me there is no weapon, and would have me infer that Mr. Hendricks did not kill himself. Then I find that the room is locked as tight as a drum and there is no possible way for any one else to have fired the shot — and escape. Do you think I am blind? You are either covering up the fact of suicide, or trying to shield the murderer!"

Lieutenant Perry paused, quite out of breath,

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with his face very red and his right hand clenched with the violence of his emotions.

The turn of affairs was so abrupt and unexpected that Grayson stood speechless. Weston had made an angry step forward, with his eyes flashing, when a low exclamation from the policeman, Burke, broke the tension.

In his right hand he was holding out a woman's white kid glove, with its thumb stained with a ragged splotch of still fresh blood.

"Found it down by the wall, sir! It was covered up by the door!"

Lieutenant Perry snatched the glove from the other's hand and held it toward the light. On the wrist was a delicately embroidered monogram in white silk.

Grayson with difficulty smothered a sharp cry. Then his eyes sought Weston's face, grown suddenly cold and hard. Both men had recognized the object on the instant. The glove was the property of Hilda Wentworth!

"H. W." The lieutenant deciphered the letters slowly. "And pray, gentlemen," he said mockingly, nodding toward Weston with a grin of exultation, "what person do these interesting initials fit?"

"I think I can answer that question, sir!"

The words came in a clear, cold tone from the

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doorway, and Hilda Wentworth, pressing her way past Wilkins' resisting arm, stepped into the room.

"The glove is mine, officer!"

She held out her hand, but the lieutenant, with a low laugh that brought the blood flaming to the girl's face, thrust the glove into his pocket.

His eyes flashed from Weston to Grayson significantly.

"I fancy, gentlemen, I have found the explanation of your cock and bull story!" he said slowly.

Grayson sprang forward with a growl.

"You will take those words back or — or —"

Weston caught his shoulder sternly. "Gently, Bob! You are only making a bad matter worse!"

The lieutenant turned to his man, Burke, ignoring Grayson's threatening attitude. "Clear the room and telephone the coroner! As for you, Miss Wentworth, I am sorry, but —"

"What?" asked the girl steadily. Reversing the situation of a few moments before, she seemed the calmest member of the group.

"I am compelled to ask you not to leave the house until I give you permission!" the officer finished brusquely.

A sudden pallor swept Hilda Wentworth's face and for an instant her eyes closed; but she fought back the weakness resolutely. With a curt nod she stepped to the door.

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"I am at your service!" she said simply.

Wilkins offered her his arm, and Weston followed the two without a backward glance. Grayson hesitated, still scowling at the lieutenant's stocky figure. The officer was glaring from the face of the dead man to the polished surface of the piano, with his nerves plainly on a feather edge.

Grayson shrugged, and had made a step toward the hall when his gaze was arrested almost mechanically by a glitter of green on the red carpet, near the wall at his right. He had taken a second step when a curious impulse — was it the factor of chance? — caused him to turn swiftly. Lieutenant Perry was bending over the body of Homer Hendricks with his face for the moment averted. Grayson's hand felt hurriedly over the carpet and closed about a small greenish object at his feet. Straightening, he walked rapidly through the doorway.

In the hall, he glanced at the object in his hand. It was a green jade ball, whose diameter was perhaps that of a quarter. Dropping it into his pocket, the young man ran down the stairs.

III

"I HAVE earned a vacation, Nora, and I intend to take it."

Madelyn Mack elevated her arms in a luxurious yawn, as she pushed aside the traveling-bag at her

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feet. The eight o'clock train had just brought her back from Denver, and six weeks in the tortuous windings of the Ramsen bullion case. I had received her telegram from Buffalo just in time to meet her at the Grand Central station, and we had driven at once to her Fifth Avenue office. As I noted the tired lines under her eyes, and the droop of her shoulders, I could appreciate something of the strain under which she had been laboring. I nodded slowly.

"Yes, you need a vacation," I agreed.

Madelyn impatiently pushed aside a stack of unopened letters. "And I intend to take it!" she repeated almost belligerently. "Business or no business!"

"With a ten thousand dollar fee for six weeks' work," I laughed somewhat enviously, "you should worry!"

Madelyn tossed her accumulated correspondence recklessly into a corner of her desk, and drew down its roll top with a bang.

"I feel like dissipating to-night, Nora. Are you up to a cabaret? A place with noise enough to drown out every echo of work!"

At her elbow the telephone shrilled suddenly. Mechanically Madelyn took down the receiver. Almost with the first sentence over the wire, I could see her features contract.

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"Yes, Mr. Grayson, this is Miss Mack talking. What is that?" In a moment she clapped her hand over the transmitter, and turned a wry face to me. "Was I foolish enough to talk about a rest, Nora? Homer Hendricks has just been shot — murder or suicide!"

Her next sentence was directed at the telephone. "Never mind what Lieutenant Perry says, Mr. Grayson! I'll be over at once. Yes, I said *at once!*"

She hung up the receiver, and sprang to her feet.

"Come on, Nora! I'll give you the details on the way!" Her weariness had vanished as though it had never existed.

She slammed the door of the office, leaving her bag where she had tossed it, and jabbed the bell for the elevator. Not until we were in her car, that had been waiting at the curb, and speeding up the Avenue, did she speak again.

"You know of Hendricks, the lawyer, of course, and his niece, Hilda Wentworth — "

"You don't mean to say that he has been killed, and the girl is suspected — "

Madelyn shrugged. "The police seem to think so!"

She drew over to her end of the seat, and subsided into an abstracted silence, as we swerved across toward the Drive. I knew that it was hope-

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less to expect her to volunteer further information, and, indeed, doubted if she possessed it.

When the car whirled up to our destination Madelyn was out on the walk before the last revolution of the wheels had ceased.

We were not more than half-way up the steps of the Hendricks residence when the door flew open, and a young man, who had evidently been stationed in the hall awaiting our arrival, sprang forward to meet us.

Madelyn smiled as she caught his impulsively extended hand.

"Any new developments, Mr. Grayson?"

"None, except that Coroner Smedley is here. He is up-stairs now with the police."

Madelyn led us to the farther end of the veranda.

"Before we go in, it will be just as well if you give me a brief summary of what has happened."

Grayson walked back and forth, his hands clenched at his sides, talking rapidly. Madelyn heard him in silence, the darkness concealing her expression.

"Is that all?" she queried at length. For a moment she stood peering out over the veranda railing. "Miss Wentworth lived with her uncle, I take it?"

"Yes."

"And inherits his property?"

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Grayson growled an affirmative.

"Suppose I change my angle, and ask if you are prepared to explain your own whereabouts at the time of the crime?"

"I have done so!"

Madelyn's eyes hardened.

"We won't mince matters, Mr. Grayson. From the police standpoint, Miss Wentworth and yourself, as her probably favored suitor, are the two persons most likely to profit by Mr. Hendricks' death. It may be awkward, perhaps exceedingly awkward, that you were the only two in the house not accounted for at the moment of the shot!"

"I have told you the truth!" Grayson dug his hands into his pockets sullenly.

Madelyn turned abruptly toward the door, and then paused. "Was Mr. Hendricks aware of your sentiments toward his niece?"

Grayson hesitated. "Certainly."

"And was not enthusiastic on the subject?"

"Well, perhaps not — er — enthusiastic." Grayson's stammer was obvious. "To be quite frank, he preferred —"

"Yes?"

"Monty Weston; but, of course —"

"I think that is enough," said Madelyn quietly. "Will you kindly lead the way in?"

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Grayson's hand, fumbling in his pockets, was suddenly withdrawn.

"By the way, here is something I almost forgot. I picked it up on the floor of Hendricks' room as we were leaving."

He extended the curious green jade ball he had found in the music-room.

Madelyn's eyes narrowed. Then she said casually, "Quite an interesting little ornament," and dropped it into her bag.

The hall of the Hendricks house was empty. The members of the tragically disrupted theatre party had retreated to the library, and were endeavoring nervously to maintain the semblance of a conversation. The police were still busy upstairs.

"You had better join your friends," said Madelyn to Grayson. "We will be down presently." And she ran lightly up the broad stairway, as I followed.

The music-room of Homer Hendricks presented a scene of confusion shattering all the precedents of its peaceful history, and almost sufficient, one was tempted to think, to call back its late master to resent the intrusion on his cherished sanctum.

The body of Mr. Hendricks was still stretched on the carpet where it had fallen. It, and the mass-

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ive piano, were the only objects in the room that had been left unchanged.

Madelyn gave a shrug of disgust as we paused in the doorway and surveyed the scene of ravage.

"Are you expecting to find gold pieces concealed in the furniture, gentlemen?"

Lieutenant Perry whirled sharply. "May I inquire, Miss Mack, since when have you been in charge of this case?"

The officer essayed a wink toward his companions, who had been increased by two plain-clothesmen and the coroner since Grayson's telephone call.

Madelyn smiled. "Your powers of humor, Lieutenant, are exceeded only by your powers of deduction!"

Her glance wandered over the torn-up room, with its chairs turned upside down, its rugs rolled up from the floor, and even its few objects of bric-a-brac removed from their places, and deposited in a corner. The search for the missing weapon that had done Homer Hendricks to death had been thorough — if nothing else.

Madelyn's eyes rested for a second time on the piano of the dead man. The instrument seemed to exert a peculiar fascination for her. With her glance fixed on the keyboard, which no one had seen fit to close, she bowed to the grinning lieutenant.

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"Will I be trespassing if I take a glance around?"

"Oh, help yourself! I reckon we have found about all there is to find!"

"Have you?" said Madelyn lightly.

The police officer righted a chair and sat down heavily on its cushioned seat, watching Madelyn's lithe figure as she walked across to Hendricks' body. As a matter of fact when she dropped to her knees, and held a pocket magnifying lens close to the white, rigid face of the dead man, she had the unreserved attention of every occupant of the room.

The lieutenant, realizing the fact, shrugged his shoulders. "Miss Sherlock Holmes at work!" he said in a tone loud enough to reach Madelyn's ears.

"I beg your pardon," said Madelyn, without shifting the position of her lens, "have you any information as to when Mr. Hendricks visited this room last, that is, previous to this evening?"

Lieutenant Perry hesitated.

"Why, er —"

"He had not been here for ten days, Miss Mack," spoke up one of his subordinates, and then continuing, before he became aware of the scowl of his superior, "He and his niece were out of town on a visit, and only arrived home to-day."

"Thank you," said Madelyn, rising, and leaning

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carelessly against the piano. "May I trouble you with another question, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant glared silently.

"Did Mr. Hendricks use tobacco?"

"He did not!"

"Thank you!" The suspicion of a smile tinged Madelyn's face.

Lieutenant Perry crossed his left leg carelessly over his knee and thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat. The farther plain-clothesman nudged his companion. This attitude of the lieutenant's was a characteristic prelude either to one of his favorite jokes or a verbal fusillade, designed to crush an opponent to the dust.

"If you are quite through with your clue-searching, Miss Mack," he said with mock humbleness, "I would like your expert opinion on a little bit of evidence *we* have picked up!"

His right hand disengaged itself for a moment and produced the blood-stained glove of Hilda Wentworth. Mr. Perry held it up almost caressingly.

"Would you care to take a squint at this with that high-power lens of yours?"

"Oh, I hardly think so!" said Madelyn indifferently. "That belongs to Miss Wentworth, does it not?"

"Righto!"

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"Then, if I might make a suggestion, I would return it to the young lady."

"Oh, you would, would you?" exploded the lieutenant. "What do you think of that, men? That is the richest joke I have heard for a month!"

Madelyn sauntered to the door.

"I may have the pleasure of seeing you below, Lieutenant," she said as she joined me.

The moment she had disappeared from the view of the men in the music-room her assumption of careless indifference vanished. Her lips closed in a tense line, as she paused at the head of the stairs.

"If those imbeciles had only left that room as it was!" Her hands were clenched as though every nerve was a-quiver. "Nora, I have got to have ten minutes alone in there! I *must* manage it!" She turned abruptly. "Will you kindly give Lieutenant Perry Miss Wentworth's compliments, and tell him she desires an immediate interview with him and the coroner in the library?"

"But," I stammered, "she doesn't!"

Madelyn glared, and then continued as though I had not interrupted her. "They will probably take two of the policemen down-stairs with them. That will leave only one behind. If you can inveigle him outside, Nora, the obligation won't be forgotten!"

"You speak as though I was a siren!" I snapped.

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"Promise him you will publish his picture in *The Bugle* in the morning," said Madelyn impatiently.

She opened the nearest door, and disappeared behind it, as I returned to the music-room in my rôle of assumed messenger. I managed to repeat Madelyn's instructions without so much as a quiver at Lieutenant Perry's sudden scowl. With a nod to the coroner, he brushed past me at once.

Madelyn's calculation proved uncannily correct. The two plain-clothesmen followed Coroner Smedley silently down the stairs in the lieutenant's wake. Only a red-faced roundsman was left twirling his stick disconsolately in the littered room.

"Good evening!" I smiled.

He glanced up with obvious welcome at the prospect of companionship.

I plunged directly to the point. "This is a big case, Mr. Dennis," I began, noting with relief that he was a professional acquaintance of mine. "It ought to mean something to you, eh?"

He grunted non-committally.

"I say, have you a good picture of yourself at home?"

Mr. Dennis looked interested.

"That is, one which would be good enough for publication in *The Bugle?*"

Mr. Dennis looked more interested.

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"I SAW MADELYN STEP QUIETLY INTO THE ROOM WE HAD VACATED."

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"Because if you have," I continued enticingly, "and will do me a favor, I will see that it is given a good position in to-morrow's story."

"What is the favor?"

"Oh, merely that you let me talk to you for ten minutes in the hall! A friend of mine wants a chance to look over this room without disturbance."

"You mean Miss Mack?" asked Dennis, suspiciously.

I smiled. "That picture of yours would look mighty nice, with a quarter of a column write-up under it. I expect Mrs. Dennis would be so tickled that she would appreciate a present from me of twenty-five copies of the paper to send to her friends!"

Dennis walked abruptly into the hall. "Come on!" he snapped.

As we reached the end of the corridor, I saw Madelyn step quietly into the room we had vacated.

I wondered curiously if Hilda Wentworth would rise to the occasion sufficiently to hold the attention of the suspicious Mr. Perry, and speculated grimly what would be the result if the lieutenant should return unexpectedly to the upper floor. My fears, however, proved unfounded. Before the ten minutes were over, Madelyn reap-

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peared, beckoned to me pleasantly, and slipped a crumpled bill into Dennis' hand as she passed him.

"I'll look for that picture at the office, Mr. Dennis," I said cordially. And then I turned anxiously to Madelyn. "Did you find anything?"

"Is it fate, or Providence, or just naturally Devil's luck that traps the transgressor?" returned Madelyn irrelevantly. She was tapping a slender blue envelope. "Exhibits A and B in the case of Homer Hendricks," she continued. "A small jade ball, and a spoonful of tobacco ashes. They sound commonplace enough, don't they?" And she thoughtfully descended the stairs.

At the door of the library she faced the group inside with a slight bow. The hum of conversation ceased. From an adjoining alcove, Miss Wentworth, nervously facing a battery of questions from Lieutenant Perry and the coroner, noted our arrival with an expression of hastily concealed relief. It was evident that the task of keeping the gentlemen of the law occupied had taxed the girl's nerves to the utmost.

Grayson had taken a position as near the alcove as he could venture, and was glowering at her inquisitors, apparently not caring whether they saw his scowls or not.

"I will be obliged for a few moments' conversa-

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tion, gentlemen!" said Madelyn pleasantly. "A *very* few moments, I assure you. I will talk to Mr. Wilkins first, if I may."

John Wilkins rose from his chair, as I found a vacant seat in the library, and joined Madelyn in the hall. In less than two minutes he returned, with his face wearing an expression of almost laughable bewilderment.

"Evidently the famous Miss Mack does not believe in lengthy cross-examinations," commented Miss Morrison as he resumed his chair.

"She asked me just four questions," said Wilkins dubiously, "and only two of them had to do with the affair up-stairs. She cut me short when I started the account of our finding the body."

Lieutenant Perry, as though to show his disdain, deepened the rasp in his examination of Miss Wentworth as he saw Weston take Wilkins' place in the hall.

Weston glanced at his watch as he returned. "It took me just one minute more than you to pass through the ordeal, old man," he confided to Wilkins, with something like a grin.

Lieutenant Perry stepped out of the alcove with a gesture of finality.

"Have you a version of the case to give to *The Bugle,* Lieutenant?" I asked, as a ring at the door-bell and a shuffling of feet on the veranda an-

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nounced the belated arrival of other members of the newspaper fraternity.

The lieutenant darted a sullen glance in the direction of Hilda Wentworth. "You may say for me," he said acidly, "that, whether suicide or murder, a certain near relative of the dead man is holding back the truth, and, and —" his eyes traveled slowly around the room, "the police expect to find measures very shortly to *make* that person speak!"

A low cry broke from Hilda Wentworth. Darting across the room, she caught the lieutenant's arm imploringly.

"Oh, please, sir, don't — don't —"

"I hardly think you need alarm yourself, Miss Wentworth!"

Madelyn was smiling quietly from the doorway. "I trust, Miss Noraker," she continued, addressing me, "that *The Bugle* will do Miss Wentworth the justice, and myself the favor, of announcing that I am prepared to *prove* that no relative of Mr. Hendricks had any connection with his death, or possesses any knowledge of how it was brought about! And furthermore, for Lieutenant Perry's peace of mind, you may add that it is a case not of suicide — but of murder!"

The lieutenant's face went a sudden, pasty yellow. Madelyn slowly drew on her gloves.

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"By the way, Lieutenant, if you and the coroner have time to meet me here at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, I will take pleasure in corroborating my statements!"

She bowed to the other occupants of the room. "I will also include in that invitation Miss Wentworth and the gentlemen who were present at the time of the murder."

She stepped back, and, adroitly skirting the group of newly arrived newspaper men, ran lightly across the pavement to her car.

At the steps of the motor I caught her. "Madelyn, just one question, *please!* How in the name of Heaven could the murderer shoot, and then escape through a locked door?"

Madelyn drew down her veil wearily.

"He didn't shoot!" she said shortly.

IV

HILDA WENTWORTH, haggard-faced after a feverishly tossing night, was toying with her breakfast grapefruit and tea, which the motherly housekeeper had insisted on bringing to her room, when the bell of the telephone tinkled sharply.

Miss Wentworth took down the receiver wearily; but, at the sound of the voice at the other end of the wire, she brightened instantly.

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"Good morning! This is Miss Mack. I am not going to ask you if you had a restful night."

"Restful night!" the girl cried hysterically. "Two of those odious policemen have been patrolling the house constantly, and watching my room as though I would steal away with the family spoons if I had a ghost of a chance!"

Miss Mack's exclamation was only partly audible, but the girl smiled wanly.

"I shall be detained perhaps a half an hour longer than I expected this morning, Miss Wentworth. If you will explain this to Lieutenant Perry, and the other gentlemen, I will appreciate it."

Miss Mack hung up the receiver abruptly. It was obvious that she was in a hurry. But there was an inflection in her tones that brought a new color to Hilda Wentworth's face, and she was surprised to find herself return to her breakfast with almost a relish.

For a moment, after she had finished the call, Madelyn sat with a pen poised thoughtfully over a pad of writing paper. Then, tossing the pen aside, she turned to the telephone again.

"Hello! *Bugle* office?" she snapped, as a belated click answered her call. "Oh, is that you, Nora? Can you give me a few moments? Good! I wish you would call at the office of Ambrose

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Murray, the president of the Third National Bank, and tell him that you were sent by Miss Mack. He may, or may not, have certain information to give you. You will deliver his message to me at the Hendricks home at a quarter after ten. Wait for me outside. Do you understand — outside?"

As the tall, old-fashioned clock in the library of the late Homer Hendricks rang out the stroke of half past ten, it gazed down on a group of six persons, whose attitudes presented an interesting study in contrasting emotions.

In the corner nearest the door stood Lieutenant Perry and Coroner Smedley. The lieutenant had refused the offer of a chair, and the coroner, who worshipped at the Perry shrine for political reasons, essayed to copy the other's majesty of demeanor, his smile of supreme boredom, and even his very attitude.

Grayson had drawn Hilda Wentworth's chair thoughtfully into the shadow of a huge palm, and was bending over her in an effort to buoy her spirits, which was apparently so successful that Weston, seated with Wilkins on the opposite side of the room, scowled savagely.

"Ten thirty!" snapped Mr. Perry, ostentatiously consulting the gold repeater, which the members of the detective department had presented to him on

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the occasion of his silver wedding anniversary. "I will give Miss Mack just five minutes more. I have work to do!"

"The five minutes will not be necessary, Lieutenant," said a quiet voice from the hall, as Madelyn and I paused in the doorway.

"Quite dramatic!" came from Mr. Perry.

Madelyn's eyes swept the room. Her graceful serenity had disappeared in a sudden tenseness. "You will please follow me up-stairs," she said, moving back.

"Up-stairs?" growled Mr. Perry.

Madelyn turned to the stairway without answer.

Miss Wentworth and Grayson were the first to comply, and the lieutenant, observing that the others were joining them, brought up a sullen rear, with the coroner endeavoring to copy his appearance of contempt.

Madelyn paused at the door of the music-room, and waited silently for us to enter. The shattered door had been temporarily repaired, and placed on a new set of hinges. Madelyn closed it, and stepped to the center of the room. She stood for a moment, staring abstractedly up at a brightly colored Turner landscape. A silence crept through the apartment, so pregnant that even Lieutenant Perry squared his shoulders.

"I am going to tell you the story of a tragedy,"

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began Madelyn, with her eyes still fixed on the landscape as though studying its bold coloring.

"In all of my peculiar experience I have never met with a crime so artistically conceived and so diabolically carried out. From a personal standpoint, I may even say that I owe the author my thanks for one of the most interesting problems which it has been my fortune to confront. In these days of bungled crime, it is a relief to cross wits with one who has really raised murder to a fine art!"

Her left hand mechanically, almost unconsciously, dropped a small round object into the palm of her right hand. It was a green jade ball. From somewhere in the room came a sudden low sound like the hiss of a trampled snake.

Madelyn's eyes dropped to the ball almost caressingly. "I am now about to re-enact the drama of Mr. Homer Hendricks' murder. I hardly think it will be necessary to caution silence until I am quite through!"

She stepped to the piano at the other end of the room, twirled the music stool a moment, and, carefully inspecting its height like a musician critical of trifles, took her seat at the keyboard.

Her hands ran lightly over the keys with the touch of the born music-lover. Then, without pre-

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amble, she broke into the storm scene from "William Tell."

Miss Wentworth was gazing at Grayson with a sort of dumb wonder. The young man pressed her arm gently.

The expression of superior boredom had entirely left Lieutenant Perry's ruddy features.

Madelyn's fingers seemed fairly to race over the keys. The thundering music of Rossini rolled through the apartment. Madelyn was reaching the climax in that superb musical painting of the war of the elements.

Again that low sibilant sound like a serpent's hiss sounded from somewhere in the taut-nerved audience, to be drowned by the sharp, clear-cut report of a revolver!

Madelyn's fingers wavered, her elbow fell with a sharp discord on the keys, and she staggered back from the stool. In the front of the piano, at a point almost directly opposite her left temple, a small hole, perhaps the diameter of a quarter, had opened in the elaborate carving, and from it curled a thin spiral of blue smoke!

With a jagged splotch of powder extending from her temple to her cheek, Madelyn sprang to her feet. From the rear of the room, a man, crouching forward in his chair, darted toward the door. Lieutenant Perry's hand flashed from his pocket with

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the instinct of the veteran policeman. At the end of his outflung arm frowned the blue muzzle of a revolver.

"You may arrest Mr. Montague Weston for the murder of Homer Hendricks!" came the quiet voice of Madelyn.

The words, instead of a spur, acted with much the effect of a sledge-hammer on the agitated figure of Weston. For an instant he gazed wildly about the room like a man confronted with a ghastly specter. The steady coolness of purpose, that had marked his brilliant rise at the bar, had shriveled in the heart-stabbing moments of Madelyn's demonstration. As Lieutenant Perry stretched a hand toward him, he fell in a sobbing heap at the officer's feet.

Madelyn jerked her head significantly from the white, drawn face of Hilda Wentworth to Weston's moaning form. The lieutenant fastened his hand on the man's collar and dragged him to his feet as the coroner flung open the door.

The suddenness of it all had gripped us as by a magnet. The creaking of a chair sounded in the tension with a sharpness that was almost painful. The denouement had occurred with the swiftness of a film from a moving picture machine — and was blotted out as swiftly as the lieutenant closed the door behind his cowering prisoner.

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Grayson breathed a long, deep sigh.

"How, how in thunder, Miss Mack, did —"

Madelyn had resumed her toying with the green jade ball. With a gesture almost like that of a schoolmistress addressing a dense student, she stepped across to the piano, and inserted the ball in the small, round hole in the heavy carving, through which had floated the blue curl of smoke. It exactly matched six other balls of green jade, set into the panels in a fantastic ornamentation.

"Before this instrument is used again," said Madelyn, as she turned, "I would recommend a thorough overhauling. Just behind the opening which I have filled is the muzzle of a revolver — loaded with a blank cartridge for this morning's purpose, but which has not always been so harmless.

"From its trigger, you will find — as I assured myself last night — a wire spring connecting with one of the treble D flats on the keyboard. When Mr. Hendricks struck it in the overture of 'William Tell,' and again when I repeated his action just now, the pressure of the key released the trigger of the weapon, and it was automatically exploded.

"When Weston attached the apparatus — your ten days' absence from the house, Miss Wentworth, giving him ample time — he used a paper substitute for the jade ball he had removed, and probably

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took occasion, when he entered the room last night, to cover over the exposed opening in the panels.

"Unfortunately for him, the imp of chance was dogging his trail. He dropped the jade ball — and the same perverse imp directed the hand of Nemesis to it.

"The psychological effect of my repetition of the crime, after the shock of the discovery of his apparatus, would have taxed a far stronger set of nerves than those of Mr. Weston!"

She paused, and then added in a musing afterthought, "Perhaps, you can tell me, Mr. Grayson, what cynical philosopher has said that all women are fickle? Mr. Weston happens to be an assiduous devotee of My Lady Nicotine. I fancy that he was so completely under her spell that he sought relief from the task of arranging his murder-spring in his favorite pipe. But she of Nicotine, perhaps in horror at his meditated crime, jilted her slave. As he bent over his work his pipe bowl was tilted ever so slightly — and the ashes, which fell with her favor, again aided the imp of chance to lead me to his trail!"

Madelyn shrugged her shoulders as though she were quite through, and then, with a sudden suggestion, continued, "The motive? What are the two greatest factors that sway men to evil?

"The first, of course, is greed. Weston, himself,

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will have to supply the details of his betrayal of the trust of Homer Hendricks. It was not until Miss Noraker brought me, just before I entered the house this morning, certain confidential information as to the financial condition of Weston, that I was absolutely certain of this link in my chain of evidence.

"Under an assumed name, he has been engineering certain questionable mining companies, and had even persuaded the man who was his life-long friend to invest a considerable share of his fortune in one of his projects. Faced by the imminence of exposure, and ruin, and unable to conceal longer the truth from Homer Hendricks, Weston's devilish ingenuity suggested the death of the man who had trusted him — and the means of carrying it out."

Madelyn walked slowly to the door, and then turned.

"I have forgotten the second of the two motives that I referred to. Of course, it is the factor of jealousy, or perhaps love. May I mention your name, Miss Wentworth?

"Goaded by the fear of losing you, he pilfered one of your gloves, and dropped it where a schoolboy was bound to see its connection with the crime. I daresay that he would have offered to establish your innocence on your promise to marry him. He

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could have done it in any one of a dozen ways, of course, without implicating himself."

Madelyn gave a sudden glance toward Wilkins and myself.

"I think that Mr. Grayson wishes to discuss that factor of love somewhat further with Miss Wentworth!"

As we stepped into the hall after her, she softly closed the door of the music-room.

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V

THE PURPLE THUMB

I

FORTY girls, from the little blonde, with the puckery lips and the perky, big red bow over her left ear, to the soulful brunette on the other end, with the flat, ratless hair, and the Madonna eyes, glided down the stage in a riot of buff and lavender draperies, very-much-agitated, very-high-heeled pumps, very-well-filled silk stockings — and a fusillade of devastating smiles.

Peter P. Peterson, theatrical magnate, from his vantage-point at the rear of the house, let a twinkle slip into his little, round eyes, almost as bright as the huge diamond-stud on his crumpled shirt-front. He was acclaimed a connoisseur of catchy choruses, and catchy chorus-girls, by the ultra-critical judges of Broadway, and the finale of the first act of that eccentric musical comedy, "The Girl from Milwaukee," was adding another notch to his carefully nursed reputation.

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Peter P. Peterson deepened his twinkle until it over-shadowed the flash of his diamond-stud as the forty girls on the stage broke their rear rank in a gliding side movement. Through the aperture, a dozen chorus-boys, dressed in old Dutch burgher style, staggered on to the stage, bearing on their padded shoulders a black-lettered barrel, labeled "Lager."

With a crash, the orchestra burst into the chorus of "That Old Milwaukee Brew." The forty girls swung forty steins above their heads in the excess of forty different thirsts — and charged the barrel like an army at an enemy's ramparts.

From its top, a tall stein slowly raised itself. For a moment it stood poised, and then its sides gradually dissolved — revealing within, in a soft golden brown glow, the face of a young woman, smiling at the audience for all the world as though she were a bewildering fantasy of the brew.

The orchestra glided into the popular strains of "I'll Drink to the Girl Who Drinks With Me," the mellow baritone of Archibald Clavering, the leading man, caught up the words, and the refrain was answered by the rich soprano of the girl in the stein — Ariel Burton, the "star," who had sprung into the Broadway horizon six months before — and out-dazzled all the other dazzling stars in that earthly firmament ever since.

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Five times the curtain rose and fell. It was a record-breaking hit. Peter P. Peterson waddled contentedly back to the box-office to receive the congratulations of the critics, and double his advertising space in the morning papers, and arrange for the announcement — "Sold Out for a Solid Five Weeks in Advance."

In the theatre, the applause was still continuing, rising and falling like surf. Still imprisoned in the stein, Miss Burton had tried to throw a kiss with her cramped hands; but the bored first-nighters, with their palates, for once, thoroughly tickled, were not satisfied.

The curtain ascended again, with the flushing "star," released from her imprisonment, stepping toward the footlights, with one of her jerky, characteristic bows. An usher was extending a huge, satin-tied bouquet.

"White orchids!" gasped a dowager, with her pearl lorgnette riveted to her eyes.

"Worth every cent of a hundred dollars!" breathed the wide-eyed debutante at her side. "I'll wager she bought them herself for an advertisement!"

The dowager glared in scorn, and pointed a fat finger, almost imperceptibly, toward the occupants of an opposite box.

"Bought it herself! It came from Sewell Col-

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lins! Can't you see her smiling up at him? Fancy an old man like that! They say he is idiotic over her!"

"But, surely, Auntie, there is nothing serious between them?"

"Serious? The old fool is going to marry her — and they say he is to settle a cool million on her the day of the wedding! Why, he gave her a ten-thousand-dollar car last week, and celebrated the occasion with a champagne supper that Bobby Waters said was a disgrace even to Broadway! But, then, that is what all those show-girls are looking for — a millionaire, the older the better!"

"She is pretty, Auntie — *very* pretty — and *young* — and — and she doesn't look like a *bad* woman!"

The debutante sighed. She, also, was very young, and pretty — and innocent.

On the stage, Ariel Burton was stepping back, with the orchids held close to her bosom. The curtain was already descending. The girl's eyes dropped carelessly to her bouquet, and then of a sudden her face went white — white as the nestling orchids.

Even under her rouge, her emotion was apparent to those in the boxes. The curtain reached the stage with a thud. Behind it, Ariel Burton had crumpled to the floor. One hand was clenched

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about the stem of the orchids until her nails had entered her palm.

Madelyn Mack pillowed her head against the back of her chair, drawn into the most shadowy corner of our box, and smiled a trifle wearily. Her hands toyed aimlessly with the handle of her ebony opera glasses, that matched her rather severely tailored black evening gown, and, when I glanced curiously toward her, I saw that her eyes had closed.

I knew the symptoms. In spite of the record-breaking applause sweeping through the theatre, she was — bored. My question was politely perfunctory.

"And how is your Royal Highness enjoying the evening?"

She opened her eyes far enough to send me one of those quizzical, half-veiled glances, which always made me feel like a pig-tailed schoolgirl.

"That blue silk of yours, Nora, is unusually becoming! Mr. Preston should feel decidedly complimented!"

"I asked how the play was appealing to you?" I retorted, severely.

Her eyes closed again. The contrast between the dark, curling lashes and the masses of golden-

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bronze hair, piled high above her white forehead in the peculiar French fashion she always affected, regardless of prevailing styles, was almost startlingly picturesque. I have always maintained that Madelyn Mack made too little of her personal appearance. Now, if half of her attractions had been possessed by an obscure newspaper girl, like myself, with a ruined complexion, which no veil could protect, and little, work-haggard lines creeping under her eyes in spite of the dollars squeezed from a slender pay envelope into the tills of greedy masseurs.

"Thank you for your implied compliment, Miss Noraker!"

I started guiltily.

"When one's companion has been trying unsuccessfully to veil her nervousness all evening," murmured Madelyn, "one is forced to the impoliteness of reading her thoughts. I shouldn't worry too much about Thorny Preston, if I were you!"

"I'm not!"

"In the first place, a successful playright like Mr. Preston — this is his third effort, is it not? — has a multitude of other duties on the first night of a new production besides playing gallant to two forlorn women! And, in the second place, if he *has* fallen victim to the charms of Miss Ariel Burton —"

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"But he hasn't!" And then I added hastily, "and, if he has, why should I care?"

"Exactly!" said Madelyn easily. "Then why have you been allowing it to torment you for the last two weeks?"

"Because it's an outrage!" I flared. I am always a volcano — when the spark is applied in the right place!

"There is absolutely nothing between Mr. Thorndyke Preston and myself, except a good-fellow comradeship. You know the kind — where a woman meets a man on a man's basis — takes long walks with him, and talks over his work — and closes her eyes and stops her ears whenever she thinks of a home and kiddies! Oh, I'm not blaming Thorny! But the way that Burton woman is throwing herself at him is nothing short of scandalous — and you know it as well as I do! She is keeping old Sewell Collins dangling at her apron-strings for the benefit of his money bags, and at the same time is trying to inveigle Thorny Preston into making a fool of himself!

"Oh, I mean *just* that, Miss Madelyn Mack — and I won't take back a word! But then, she is only twenty-one, and has a smile like Cleopatra — and I am twenty-eight, with crow's feet, and grey hairs — I found five last night! — And — Thorny is just like other men, I suppose, where a pretty

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face is concerned. And — and — a good-fellow comradeship isn't so very satisfying — to a man — is it?"

I finished, gasping, with a dart at my handkerchief, and my face that awfully vivid red, like pickled beets, which I have never been able to subdue whenever I pass a certain degree of excitement.

For a moment, I felt Madelyn's steady eyes surveying me, with just a hint of wonder at my outbreak, and — and — yes, — *pity!* I hate sympathy — from a woman!

'Twas then that the curtain rolled up again on the incident of the white orchids.

We were both leaning over the railing when the descending canvas hid Ariel Burton's swaying form.

Madelyn slipped back into her chair. Above her eyes a single deep line had appeared, like the swift course of a pencil across a blank paper. Her eyes closed again; but I knew that her nerves had sprung to a sudden tension, and I could guess that she was trying to supply the other half of the incident which the curtain had blotted from us.

There came a low knock at the door of our box. I gave a muffled invitation to enter, for my sixth sense — how many senses does a woman have? —

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told me who it was. Thorndyke Preston stood staring down at us with a flush.

He tried to conceal his emotion, but Thorny never could hide anything, and the effort only served to emphasize his nervousness.

"I have a commission for you, Miss Mack, if you will accept it. Mr. Peterson would like to see you on the stage!"

Madelyn Mack's eyes wandered over his face, and his flush deepened. "Is it — Miss Burton?"

"It is in connection with Miss Burton. You saw her faint, of course. Peterson fancies there is something queer. He is very excitable anyway, you know, and —"

"But I fail to see where my services come in. Miss Burton is recovering, is she not?"

"Yes — but — oh, hang it all! — *please* go back, Miss Mack! Peterson is getting on my nerves!"

Thorny's eyes turned to me pleadingly. "You ask her, Nora!"

I smiled indifferently. "I fancy that Miss Mack can make up her mind without my assistance!" I turned, with a shrug, to gaze over the audience; but, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Thorny's lips tighten. If he had been alone, I know he would have sworn — and a woman who

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can make a man swear has not *quite* lost her power over him!

Madelyn rose with a gesture of submission. "If you will accompany me, Nora —"

I felt Thorny's eyes again appealing to me, but I kept my gaze steadily averted. I smoothed down my skirts, and caught Madelyn's arm. Thorny led the way down the thick-carpeted corridor which led behind the boxes to the stage door.

He *was* a good-looking chap, with a grave, studious expression — which I always accused him of cultivating for effect — and the snugness of his evening clothes showed off his athletic shoulders to excellent advantage. His bearing radiated that indefinable suggestion of success after heart-gripping failures, for Thorny had fought long and hard for every dollar of the Niagara-stream of royalties now flooding him. Our own acquaintance had begun in the days when he was doing a "Man About Town" column for *the Sun,* at a very modest salary, and I'll do him the justice to say that his success had not turned his head.

It had not even brought him the luxury of a valet! Once he *had* cautiously broached the suggestion to me, when he had received twenty-five thousand dollars from "Mademoiselle Satan;" but, after my stony silence, he had never repeated it, and, at the next bachelor dinner in his rooms,

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I noticed that the valet had not made his appearance. Fancy Thorny with a valet — when I had to press my skirts with an electric iron, attached to my single socket, when the suspicious landlady was away, and burning my hands at every step on the stairs in the fear of discovery!

Thorny held open the stage-door, and waited until both of us had preceded him into the clatter of scene-shifting. With a side glance, I saw him linger behind, and felt a tug on my sleeve.

"I am glad you came to-night, Nora!"

"Are you?" I said coldly, with my eyes on a shirt-sleeved carpenter nailing into place the grey pillar of a Swiss hotel. "By that, you mean I'll give your old play a nice send off in *the Bugle,* I suppose?"

I'll own it was nasty, but I was in the mood for nastiness. I tried hard to look away.

"You'll regret those words, Nora."

I was already beginning to, then! If I had only missed that glimpse of him in the park in Ariel Burton's new car, bending over her furs like a school-boy lover!

"Save your tragedy for your plays!" I said crossly. "Do you realize that you are letting Miss Mack take care of herself?"

He strode toward the little, lithe figure ahead of us. For an instant, my better nature swept to the

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front. I had already opened my lips to do humble penitence, when he whirled with two little red spots, hardly larger than quarters, burning his cheeks.

"So you are jealous of Ariel Burton, are you? And I had thought *you* the one woman above such emotions — who could look under the surface, and know a man for what he is! Funny, isn't it, how blind a chap can be — and what a bump it takes to make him see light?"

I could have screamed. I knew the tears were in my eyes, and I clenched my hands to force them back. Jealous! And Thorny Preston actually with the nerve to throw it in my teeth! For one rioting moment I meditated a swift flight from the stage, leaving him and Madelyn to their own devices. And then I stumbled chokingly after them. After all, I was possessed of the full measure of a woman's curiosity.

But I would make Mr. Thorndyke Preston repent, never fear! I could picture him on his knees already! A stage-hand crashed into me, and I ducked barely in time to save my new blue silk opera cap, and, incidentally, my head, from a descending plank.

When I recovered my balance, and readjusted my cap, my blood was somewhat cooled — and Madelyn Mack and Thorny had reached the stocky fig-

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ure of Peterson. The latter bowed with a hasty attempt at cordiality to me as I joined them — Peterson was oily affability from his patent leather tips to his brown toupee whenever a newspaper reporter was in hailing distance!

Just across from us was the portable stage dressing-room which had been erected in the left wing for the accommodation of Miss Burton. Unless special quarters were fitted up for her on the stage she wouldn't play, you know — and all the rest of the high and mighty threats which go with newly created stardom!

Once the door was shoved open far enough for us to see Miss Burton before her toilet-table, with her hair down, and her shoulders wrapped in a crimson silk negligee, almost the color of blood — she always affected the most out-of-the-ordinary shades! We could see the back of her white-capped, white-aproned maid, bending over a long line of gowns and petticoats against the wall.

Two or three minutes later, two of the stage-hands knocked at the door, and dragged out a trunk. Miss Burton was still in her negligee, although her hair had been put up. Once afterward, we heard the actress' voice raised peevishly, and the maid replying with the discreet humbleness of her class.

Presently you will see my purpose in recounting

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these details, apparently so trivial. We were to find that nothing was trivial or unworthy of notice in the amazing puzzle into which we were all so soon to be plunged.

With much nervous rubbing of his hands, and much nervous clearing of his throat, Peterson was beginning the statement of his purpose in the summoning of Madelyn, when I came in earshot of the trio.

"I am not a fanciful man, Miss Mack — I have made my success because I wasn't! But there is something deucedly queer in it all — *deucedly* queer! And Ariel Burton toppling over like a sixteen-year-old school-miss, on top of everything else, and throwing us all into a panic, and — "

"Will you please start at the beginning, Mr. Peterson, and put what you have to say in a businesslike way?" interrupted Madelyn impatiently.

"That is what I am trying to do!" said Peterson, scowling at Thorny, who was walking nervously back and forth behind us. "The first of those letters came last week, just after dress-rehearsal. It simply told her that she would never finish her first performance in the piece!"

Madelyn's eyes narrowed. "Typewritten?"

Peterson nodded. "And unsigned. It was worded rather oddly, as though there had been other letters to the same effect; but Miss Burton

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said not. It impressed me that the writer was hinting at blackmail; but he didn't say how or why. I am assuming that it was a man, although I don't know why I should, except that it didn't sound like a woman, you know!" Peterson paused, still rubbing his red hands together.

"There was another letter a good deal like the first — and then that fainting spell to-night." Peterson's little, round eyes fixed themselves suddenly on Madelyn's face. "That girl was scared when she fell over on the stage — scared! I know the signs!"

"Have you any of those letters with you?"

"I'll get them for you later. There was one funny thing, though, in both of them. At the bottom of each a thumb had been drawn — an ordinary thumb — and just a little of its top edged with purple ink. There was nothing under it — just the thumb, with the purple edge." Peterson broke off abruptly. "I want you to stay back here on the stage the rest of the show, Miss Mack — and sort of keep an eye on Miss Burton — you know how — and, of course, she needn't know! I'll pay you whatever you ask! It's probably a crank, and I am foolish to pay any attention to it — and all that — but I have a lot at stake in this show — and I'm nervous — nervous as an old woman! Now, *please* don't say you won't do it!"

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"Was there anything in Miss Burton's bouquet to-night — a note of any kind, I mean?" asked Madelyn abruptly.

"A note?" Peterson considered. "I can find out easily enough, I suppose. The flowers came from Sewell Collins, you know. They say there is a certain florist over on the Avenue that he keeps busy supplying Miss Burton, without regard to the size of the bills. Ten-dollar-a-dozen roses by the dray-load, and so on!" The padded shoulders of Peterson's evening coat shrugged expressively.

"But, I say," he continued suddenly, "Preston there can tell you about any note, though. He was the first to reach her when she fainted."

Thorny stopped in his nervous pacing.

"What was that you were saying, Peterson?"

Peterson stared, and repeated his suggestion.

Thorny shrugged. "No, Miss Mack, there was nothing in the bouquet — nothing, I assure you! I picked it up, myself!"

He resumed his nervous patrol. Madelyn turned with another question to Peterson. A call-boy knocked at Ariel Burton's door, and, beyond the curtain, we could hear the orchestra swinging into action.

I stooped to fasten my slipper — but the bow was never more secure. On the floor I had seen a narrow white card that had fluttered from

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Thorny's pocket. On its upper side a human thumb had been crudely traced, its edge smeared with purple ink! Nothing else — except that the white petal of an orchid was still clinging to it.

I slipped it into my glove. Of course it had been concealed in Ariel Burton's bouquet. Thorny Preston had lied — deliberately lied!

II

By the sudden hush of the orchestra, and its abrupt swing into the opening bars of a conventional musical comedy ballet-number, I knew that the curtain was rising on the second act.

Almost at once, the door of Ariel Burton's dressing-room opened, and she stepped out in a velvet traveling suit of royal purple with its accessories an exact match, from her purple suede boots to her purple wrist bag, purple parasol, and even the purple willow plumes on her hat. Stunning — if you have superlatives to spare!

For a moment my absorption in another woman's dress blinded me to the other details of the scene. I awoke from my trance to see Thorny Preston, roused thoroughly out of his preoccupation, stepping toward her, with a silly grin that fairly made me itch to shake him! He caught her arm, with an air of proprietorship, and they walked to the

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other end of the stage, conversing in whispers. I saw Thorny bow as her cue came, and then, turning, take her hand again and press it — yes, actually *press* it! — while she lingered, keeping the whole scene waiting.

He saw my eyes fixed on him as he stepped back toward her dressing-room, and he grinned cheerfully, without even the grace to blush. I turned with a contemptuous shrug, and plunged into a conversation with Peterson so lively that that gentleman's little eyes opened wide. We had not been on congenial terms since that day when my signed article in *the Bugle* had flayed him for ticket-scalping.

A slow, heavy step on the planks of the stage behind us interrupted me in the midst of a particularly inane witticism. A fat-jowled, double-chinned man, with a monocle dangling from under the lapel of his evening coat, stared at us, with a very slight, very stiff-necked inclination of his head.

Peterson's cordiality, however, could not have been exceeded had the other salaamed to the dusty boards. It was my first good view of Sewell Collins at close range, and I improved the opportunity as Peterson seized the other's fish-cold hand and swung it up and down like a pump-handle.

Some biographer had once said that Sewell

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Collins had begun his pyrotechnical life as a molder's apprentice in a steel foundry — and presumably laid the foundation of his millions from his savings on six dollars a week. I had heard of that kind of men, but I had never seen one before — and I was disappointed. I looked in vain for anything remarkable about Sewell Collins that would explain his Aladdin-rise, but there was nothing — nothing at all masterful or even particularly shrewd.

Instead, he looked like any other much-moneyed, much-massaged, much-pampered old man — except, of course, for the tell-tale trail of the expensive tenderloin on his pudgy face, which even the steam-cloths of the masseur could not quite remove. From the Broadway tales of his spending abilities I was half expecting to see crumply yellow-back bills sticking out of all his pockets, and fluttering to the floor as he walked. But either he had not been immersed long enough in his customary champagne bath, or he was suspicious of his present company!

Sewell Collins had timed his arrival to a nicety. Peterson was still in the throes of his pump-handle greetings when Ariel Burton descended from the "property" automobile, in which she had made her exit from the stage as a brewery-heiress, pursued by a penniless Belgian count, determined to

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marry her millions if he had to imprison her in his little, old, two-by-four castle to do so!

Collins wrenched away from Peterson's grasp, and hastened to meet her, with a fawning grin that would have promptly convinced any fair minded judge of his lunacy. (Why is it that an actress, with just one belladonna smile, can reduce the whole masculine sex, from the college rah-rah boy to the old man, with a foot-and-a-half in the grave, to abject senility?)

Thorny Preston was something like a yard ahead of him, however. I saw Collins' heavy-lidded eyes gleam as Thorny blocked his path — and then Miss Burton turned away from Mr. Preston as coolly as though he had been a post, and caught both of Sewell Collins' hands! Thorny stood as motionless as a statue.

I knew that in another minute I would be snickering out loud, and, even as I turned my head, I realized that Thorny had seen my convulsed features, and was biting his lips. Turned down for a stage-door "John," with a few dozen millions! It was — *delicious!*

Ariel Burton dismissed Sewell Collins at her dressing-room, and softly closed the door behind her. The much-millionaired Mr. Collins seated his Midas-form on a ninety-eight-cent pine chair, without a back, and stared at the door like a

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trained bull-dog, waiting for its mistress to reappear.

I strolled over to Madelyn Mack, who had been standing somewhat apart, alternately gazing at a group of chorus-girls, awaiting their cue, and at a trio of perspiring stage-hands, already lifting the back of the next scene into place. Apparently, she had not found the slightest interest in the happenings before Miss Burton's dressing-room.

But you never can tell where Madelyn's thoughts are from the direction of her eyes. As I paused at her side, she said in a low tone, "Will you kindly give me that card which dropped from Mr. Preston's pocket?"

"What card?" I evaded.

"Don't be foolish, Nora!"

There was nothing else to do. I extended it to her with a shrug, and watched her with a little catch as she sauntered behind an unused "drop," and stood staring down at the cardboard.

Through the thin walls of the dressing-room I could hear the drone of voices — twice the tones of Ariel Burton, in a sharp, nagging key, and once the voice of the French maid, answering with a tired drag.

The door of the dressing-room opened. A white, lace-capped head appeared, two slender, black-sateen-waisted shoulders, a pair of tiny-

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heeled slippers, and, above them, a trim, ankle-length skirt, and a coquettish, lace-trimmed apron.

Miss Burton's French maid swept a pair of large, blue-black eyes around our group, and tripped down the stairs to the double tier of women's dressing-rooms below. She was gone perhaps two, certainly not over three, minutes. The door of the dressing-room remained closed. Evidently Miss Burton was finishing her change of costume with her own hands.

When the maid returned, the call-boy, with the "star's" next cue, met her as she was re-entering the dressing-room. On the stage we could hear the swish of gliding pumps, above the muffled strains of a waltz-number, and could see the changing blue and violet rays of the spot-light, shadowing the whirling forms of the DeWeese sisters, acrobatic dancers.

The maid opened the dressing-room door, nodded to the call-boy, with a flash of her black eyes — a French girl would die of ennui if she couldn't flirt! — and whisked her skirts from our gaze.

The dancers on the stage made their exit, panting. There was a lull. It was Miss Burton's turn to make her next bow to the audience.

The door of the dressing-room opened again,

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and the maid swept a pair of puzzled eyes in our direction.

"Mademoiselle Burton has already gone on ze stage? Oui?"

"Certainly not!" Peterson snapped.

The girl's bewilderment deepened.

"Tell her she must hurry!" the manager added.

"But, Messieur, where ees she? She ees not in ze dressin'-room!"

"Ridiculous!" Peterson brushed past the maid's figure, and stepped into Miss Burton's littered sanctum.

Even to a novice it was apparent that the stage was unusually quiet. The call-boy appeared again, dishevelled.

"Say, Mr. Clavering can't make up lines all night! Where's Miss Burton?"

Peterson's head jerked out of the dressing-room. He raised a limp hand, and beckoned as though he could not speak.

Madelyn caught his arm. "What is wrong?"

Peterson found his voice, in a curious mumble. "She is — gone — *gone!*"

The manager's knees sagged, and he gripped the wall.

"Say, Mr. Clavering can't make up lines all night!" the call-boy repeated shrilly.

Madelyn pushed past Peterson, and her eyes

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swept the ten-foot-square room behind him — the bird's-eye maple toilet-table, the chair before it, with the blood-red silk kimono tossed over its back, the huge trunk in the corner, the little writing desk and rocker, the long line of gowns across two sides.

There was no ceiling. The walls had been erected a height of perhaps ten feet above the stage, and an electric wire strung over them, with two hanging bulbs, one over the toilet table and another over the desk. A square Navajo rug covered the center of the floor. Despite the temporary nature of the apartment and the board walls, Miss Burton had succeeded in giving it several homelike touches.

There was but one door — that before us, through which we had seen the actress enter the room. Other form of exit was, of course, out of the question. An agile person, by standing on the trunk, *might* have scrambled over the walls, and dropped. But such a proceeding would have been in plain view of all of us.

Peterson drew a moist hand over his eyes, and gripped Madelyn Mack's shoulders, still in a daze.

"She's not here!"

"That is evident!" said Madelyn, impatiently.

"But we saw her come in!" Peterson was mouthing his words. "And she did not go out!"

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"Quite so!" agreed Madelyn.

Peterson blinked violently, and made a gurgling sound in his throat as though he were choking.

Behind me, Sewell Collins and Thorny Preston were wedged into the doorway. The face of Collins was blanched an ash-grey, even to the little, pudgy bags under his eyes. Drops of perspiration were beading Thorny's forehead.

Over their shoulders, the French maid was peering at us with terror-widened eyes. One of her hands had caught Collins' arm, although neither appeared conscious of the fact.

Madelyn stepped toward the heavy trunk. It was not locked, and the cover swung easily back. I caught hold of one end of the upper tier of compartments, and we lifted it to the floor. Below was a mass of neatly folded gowns, dozens of them, it seemed to me, reaching clear to the top. We dumped them out rather ruthlessly — but there was nothing beneath.

We stared at one another, with the same unspoken thought. It was the only possible place of concealment the room afforded! Why, it was — *uncanny!* I caught myself glancing fearfully around us, as though I, too, would be caught up into thin air, and whisked into some strange realm of the Fourth Dimension, for instance! (Wherever and whatever that is!)

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I turned my bewildered eyes above me. The huge flies of the theatre, far up under the roof, were swaying lazily, perhaps twenty-five feet away. Through the intervening space there was absolutely no connection with the thin-partitioned room below.

Madelyn seized the end of the rug, jerked it back, and scrutinized the planks beneath. Peterson, still in his uncertain daze, staggered to the trunk, and tugged it aside. But the floor showed no hint of opening from wall to wall. Not a board was disturbed.

"We saw her come in!" Peterson stuttered again. "And she did not go out!"

His eyes wavered toward each of us in turn, but saw nothing but a blankness as utter as his own. He tottered to the trunk, sank down on to it — a wilted rag of a man.

The call-boy shoved his head under Thorny's arm with his staccato refrain. "I say, Mr. Clavering can't be making up lines all night!"

"Shut up!" Thorny growled.

Madelyn turned. "Has Miss Burton an understudy?"

"Of course — that is, I suppose Miss Hunt — but surely you don't mean —"

"You'd better get her — if you intend to finish the show!"

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Thorny glanced at Peterson, but the manager was huddled back on the trunk, helpless.

He whirled to the call-boy.

"Tell 'em to ring down the curtain, and bring Miss Hunt to me!"

He hesitated, stared at the crumpled figure of the manager, shrugged again. "I suppose there is nothing else for it!" He stepped back reluctantly. "I'll announce that Miss Burton is ill, that she cannot resume her rôle; that the play will continue with Miss Isabelle Hunt in her part!"

His shoulders stiffened (Thorny always could rise to an emergency); but he did not move. It was as though he, too, were held to the spot, like the rest of us, by the weird fascination of it all.

"For God's sake, Miss Mack, what has happened?" Thorny's voice was husky.

Madelyn was toying with a hair-brush on the toilet-table. Impulsively I stepped forward. The card that had come with Miss Burton's bouquet had fallen to the floor. The six of us, grouped in the dressing-room, formed a perfect circle about the bit of pasteboard, with its curious, purple-edged thumb.

Suddenly I checked myself, drew back. As clearly as though Madelyn had given the spoken command that stopped my movement, I knew that she intended another hand than mine to recover

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the dropped card, knew that she had cast it in our midst with deliberate purpose.

Sewell Collins stirred, stooped mechanically.

"I believe this fell from your bag, Miss Mack." The pudgy lines of his features were unchanged. His heavy-lidded eyes blinked rather listlessly.

"Thanks," said Madelyn perfunctorily.

In the background, Thorny Preston's face had gone chalk-white. His right hand flashed to a side pocket of his coat, apparently felt an empty lining, and dropped to his side.

Abruptly he turned to the door, pushed it open, and, without a word to us, strode out on to the stage.

A cry cut the silence, and ended in a choke. The French maid had fallen to her knees, gasping hysterically.

III

It was Peterson who first spied the golden butterfly.

Crouched on the edge of the trunk, his stare had probably swept the glittering ornament on the floor a dozen times before he mustered sufficient interest to slip down from his seat and close his fingers over it.

We saw him turn it over absently. Then he

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raised his head with a ragged, little laugh and tossed it on to the writing desk. I picked up the ornament idly in my turn — a cunningly fashioned little affair, perhaps an inch and a half in length, representing a butterfly with wings outstretched. It was surprisingly heavy, too, with the weight of solid gold, probably a trinket from one of those exclusive Fifth Avenue shops, which make even a millionaire arch his eyebrows.

But I could see no hint of its use. Certainly it was not intended for a brooch or a clasp, for there was no sign of pin. I shrugged, balancing it nervously in my fingers.

There came a strained silence, broken only by the sobs of the maid. We were rather avoiding one another's eyes, most of us gazing vacantly at the floor, a curious sense of unrest, vague, elusive, in the air. I drew my shoulders together. It was — cold! And then I realized it was the chill of fear — the fear of the unseen, the unknown. And I divined that it was stealing upon all of us.

And yet a hundred feet away, a thousand shoulders were laughter-shaking at the mirth of a painted stage!

Miss Burton's understudy had probably risen to the emergency. In fact, Thorny Preston, appearing in the doorway, jerkily explained as much. I could see that his hands were clenched.

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Thorny's voice trailed to a pause; he shifted his feet awkwardly. "The police — you think perhaps we ought to — why don't some of you *say* something?"

Sewell Collins raised his heavy eyebrows. "Don't you think you are — hasty? The police?" He shrugged.

"But the girl may be dying — murdered!"

"Do you charge then that Miss Burton's disappearance is not due to natural causes?"

I realized that Thorny was flushing unjustifiably; or so it seemed to me.

The strained silence fell again. Thorny paced back and forth in front of the door, showing us occasional glimpses of his face, with his lips set in a tight line. Collins fumbled in his pocket, produced a gold cigarette case, and then, remembering himself, returned it with a sigh.

We could hear the orchestra in the midst of the liveliest number on the program. I wondered vaguely if Thorny's explanation of Ariel Burton's illness had been accepted, if rumors of the real situation had yet crept out. It was only a matter of minutes, of course, before the truth would be known — must be known.

Thorny thrust himself abruptly through the doorway. His eyes flashed around the room, and ended at Collins' morose face.

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"If one of you won't call the police, I will!" His voice was sharp, challenging.

"You seem to take a great deal for granted, Mr. Preston!" Collins' eyes narrowed almost angrily.

"Don't beat about the bush, man! Say what you mean! You are afraid of the reporters, the publicity — you, whose town-painting exploits have given the newspapers copy for years!"

For a moment I thought Collins would strike him. Thorny laughed in his face.

"Oh, I know you are confoundedly cautious! But *I* haven't any tenderloin record to cover up! I am going to put this matter in the hands of the law without any more nonsense! You can hike for Europe in the morning, if you are afraid of the red fire!"

Collins' eyes were like burning coals under his heavy lids, and a zig-zagging vein over his forehead swelled into a purple ridge.

"Miss Burton is my promised wife!" His voice snapped. "And I rather fancy that I have more interest in this matter even than you — her rejected suitor!"

"You lie!"

Peterson's bulk intervened before Thorny's crooked arm just in time. "Gentlemen, you forget yourselves!"

Thorny gripped Peterson's shoulder, pivoted

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him about, then lunged toward Collins' fat throat. Madelyn glided between the two as easily as though she were offering the explosive Mr. Preston a cup of tea.

"If you would really serve Miss Burton," she said quietly, "you are scarcely offering us a convincing demonstration!"

Thorny's arm dropped limply, and he breathed sharply.

"I — I beg your pardon, Miss Mack!"

Odd, isn't it, how swiftly the primitive passions can burst through the starched shirt-front of civilization — and yet how abruptly they can be checked!

Collins swept his handkerchief over his forehead.

"As I was about to say when I was interrupted, if the majority favor the police, so far from opposing the action, I will —"

Our eyes were riveted on him like a magnet. He paused, thrust the handkerchief back into his pocket.

"Pay twenty thousand dollars for the return of Miss Burton uninjured — or a similar amount for the conviction of any who have dared to offer her harm!"

It was splendidly done — no pompousness. (I am bound to say that much for him!) And he was in cold earnest. The deliberate inflection of

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his voice could not be denied. But — twenty thousand dollars! I glanced involuntarily toward Madelyn Mack. She had picked up the golden butterfly I had dropped, and was balancing it with the same abstraction with which she had toyed with the hair-brush.

Peterson shook himself, smoothed his toupee, and glanced toward the door. He was slowly returning to his old aggressiveness. Collins' offer was at least something tangible — something more practical and earthly than spirit-abducted ladies! — And Peterson began and ended everything with the dollar mark!

"Shall I telephone headquarters?" The manager addressed the question directly to Madelyn.

"I presume you will have to — sooner or later," she said indifferently.

Peterson weighed her words silently, let his eyes circle the room again, and strode through the doorway. I imagine that he was not at all reluctant to leave!

Sewell Collins turned heavily, and walked out on to the stage in his wake. The maid was still crouched in the corner, her eyes following us like those of a frightened fawn I had once seen quivering under the lash of its keeper.

Through the wings, a zig-zagging file of chorus-girls, their rouged cheeks glaring in the near-

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lights, trooped past the dressing-room, staring, whispering, neck-craning. Already, it was evident that fragments of the real situation had penetrated beyond our circle.

Thorny closed the door, pushed a chair toward me, scowled at an unlighted cigarette in his fingers, and then gave a whistle.

I followed the direction of his stare. On the back of the door was hanging the royal purple suit in which we had last seen Ariel Burton. Even her hat was reposing on a hook, with its feathers curling lazily down.

Thorny's whistle lengthened. "Then she had changed her clothes before — "

Madelyn glanced up from the chair where she was sitting, with her back toward us, her head down.

She frowned. "Of course!"

The minutes dragged by. None of us spoke. Thorny chewed his cigarette without applying a match, tossed it away finally, and stepped out on to the stage. I would have wagered he was seeking a place to smoke! — Sometimes, I wish I were a man with a fat, brown cigar to bring back my runaway nerves, instead of a woman, with a flood of tears as her only relief when the willies are playing tag up and down her spine!

Peterson should have been back. Perhaps, how-

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ever, he was awaiting the police. I looked at my watch, suddenly remembering my duties as a newspaper-woman. I was half-tempted to communicate with the office, and had even taken a step toward the door, when it opened to admit Peterson, flanked on either hand by a stiffly solemn plain-clothes man. Just behind them peered the lean, hatchet-face of Lieutenant Byron, with his lank form attired in — I rubbed my eyes unbelievingly — yes, an evening suit! And it fitted him! His hands, folded behind his back, as though to escape comment, were encased in white gloves, and he was limping in a pair of tight patent leathers. And this was grizzled, old Byron, the slouchiest man of the Central Office! I gasped at the metamorphosis.

Byron grinned sheepishly as he caught my eye; but the next moment his professional calm had masked his face, and he was again the inscrutable police officer.

He nodded gravely to Madelyn Mack, and she at once held out her hand. Byron was one of the very few Central Office Detectives who had a place in her esteem!

"Shall we leave?" she asked briskly.

Peterson glanced awkwardly at Byron. "Certainly not!" the lieutenant said heartily. "That is — yourself. As for the others," his eyes wan-

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dered toward myself and the maid, "we are cramped here — perhaps — "

"We will all wait outside!" Madelyn broke in. "I am quite through my own humble investigations here, thank you!"

The door closed behind us. The police were officially in possession of Ariel Burton's dressing-room. My last glimpse of the apartment was of Lieutenant Byron's lean face scowling at the beveled glass of the toilet table; but whether it was at the thought of the knotty problem before him, or at the reflection of his own unusually adorned person, I don't know.

Thorny Preston had vanished, probably to some sequestered spot with his cigarette-case. Sewell Collins was leaning against the brick wall, obviously quite effectually occupied with his own thoughts.

Madelyn met a half-hearted attempt of mine to open a conversation with a cold silence. It was thus we stood when the incident of Gwendolyn Calvert occurred.

From a quartet of chorus-girls, emerging from the lower dressing-rooms, a little, dimpled, yellow-haired figure, in a pink, short-skirted frock, detached itself, and a pair of big, blue, innocent eyes stared at us. — How does the worldly-wise show-girl contrive to gaze out at the world with such child-like innocence?

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"You are Miss Mack?"

The shy notes of the voice matched the shy wonder of the eyes.

Madelyn inclined her head.

"Miss Madelyn Mack, the detective?"

"What can I do for you?"

"I am Gwendolyn Calvert." (I knew it! She was just the kind of a girl one would call Gwendolyn, or Genevieve, or Flossie!)

She glanced over her shoulder, hesitated, cleared her voice. "You don't look like such a horrible person!"

"Don't I?"

"I always imagined a woman-detective wore men's collars, thick-soled shoes, and brushed her hair back straight in a little knot!"

The girl's eyes were studying Madelyn intently. I saw now that she was neither so innocent nor so young as she appeared, in spite of her guileless eyes and the blondined ringlets dangling girlishly over her shoulder.

"I suppose when you tell things to a detective, it is a good deal like going to confessional — I mean that what you say is never told to anybody else — *never?*"

"That depends a good deal on its importance as evidence."

"Does that mean you might have to go to a

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stuffy court-room, and talk to a judge in a black robe, and have the horrible prosecuting attorney scowl at you, and rake up the story of your life, and read it in the papers, with a fearful snap-shot of yourself, the next day?"

"Perhaps not quite so bad as all that." Madelyn was smiling rather impatiently.

Gwendolyn Calvert glanced over her shoulder again, stepped closer to us until we could breathe the perfume on her bodice, and lowered her voice like a tattling child, telling secrets out of school.

"I understand that something awful has happened to Miss Burton, and — and — there is something I ought to tell you! You are sure you will protect me?"

"Yes, yes — of course!"

"Well, then, last night I heard a man threaten to kill her to-day!"

Madelyn glanced across the stage with an assumption of indifference.

"Indeed?"

"He was very much excited!" The girl raced on, evidently piqued at her failure to awaken more pronounced interest. "Told her, if she didn't marry him to-day, he would put her out of the reach of any man!"

"And who was this interesting individual?"

"Thorny Preston!"

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Madelyn's eyes still remained fixed languidly on a distant piece of scenery.

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I thought Mr. Preston was one of my best friends — my *best* friend — and he had promised to marry *me!* There is no man living who can double-cross little Gwendolyn — and get away with it!"

I whirled so sharply that I knocked her elbow. I could feel myself growing almost livid. Another love-tangle of Mr. Thorndyke Preston! And I had fancied myself the only woman in the world for him! Blinded fool that I had been! I could see that Madelyn was watching me out of the corner of her eye, and I tried to walk away — but I *couldn't!* I was rooted to the spot.

Gwendolyn Calvert stiffened her shoulders. "I don't know if what I have told you is of any use to you; but, if Thorny Preston has brought harm to Ariel Burton, I shall never be content until he answers for it! She may have a temper like a wild-cat when she is crossed; but she was a friend to me when I would have hit the gutter if it hadn't been for her!"

Her face was very hard and cold and set. Even her blondined ringlets seemed to tingle viciously.

But I scarcely heard her, or the detailed story that followed of Thorny's melodramatic interview

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with Ariel Burton at the previous day's dress-rehearsal.

I was longing for my hall-bedroom, and hard mattress, and a long, long cry in the dark — alone.

IV

FROM THE SCRAP-BOOK OF NORA NORAKER, REPORTER FOR *The New York Bugle,* UNDER DATE OF JANUARY 16, 1914, BEING A PORTION OF HER ACCOUNT OF THE ASTOUNDING DISAPPEARANCE OF ARIEL BURTON, STAR OF "THE GIRL FROM MILWAUKEE" MUSICAL COMEDY COMPANY — AND THE *only accurate* NEWSPAPER CHRONICLE OF THE EVENT.

(The underscoring is my own — without apologies. No, I am *not* open to any reportorial offer at the present time, regardless of salary inducements, or short hours. — N. N.)

> "Has the earth swallowed Ariel Burton, leading lady of 'The Girl from Milwaukee'? Has she dissolved into thin air, or has some unknown supernatural force snatched her from human eyes?
>
> "In the answer to those questions the police are confronting the most unique

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riddle of recent years, a riddle without parallel in criminal annals.

"With a packed audience awaiting her reappearance behind the footlights, Miss Burton closed the door of her dressing-room at the Metropolitan Theatre at nine forty-five o'clock last night to make her change of costume for the last half of the second act — and vanished as completely and suddenly as though the ground had closed over her. With the shutting of her door, she stepped from mortal view.

"A slight exception must be made to this statement — which tends, however, to deepen the mystery even further. For perhaps five minutes after her entrance to her room, Miss Burton's French maid attended her at her toilet, leaving her mistress half-dressed, to carry a message to Miss Wordsworth, the ingenue of the company, in regard to a slight change which Miss Burton intended to make in the manner of her entrance on the stage.

"Miss Burton was in her usual spirits, and proceeding with the details of her make-up. The maid was the last person to see the actress.

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"Not more than three minutes elapsed before the servant's return, but in this period Ariel Burton disappeared as utterly as though she had — evaporated.

"From the moment of the maid's departure until her return, at least five persons were constantly before the door of the dressing-room. They are prepared to swear that no one entered or left the room, and the single door was the only possible entrance to the apartment — a portable dressing-room built on the left end of the stage.

"Furthermore, they substantiate the statement of the servant that she left her mistress in normal spirits, from the fact that, while Miss Burton was dressing, the voices of both the actress and her maid were frequently heard over the sides of the room, which is not more than ten feet in height, and without a ceiling.

"No evidence of crime has been discovered, no sign of foul play, no suggestion of tragedy — in fact, not the slightest hint that would tend to unravel any phase of the amazing problem.

"The floors and walls of the room proved absolutely intact, when search was

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made. And exit over the ten foot sides was out of the question, without immediate discovery from persons on the stage.

"And yet, with these facts definitely established, it was just as evident that the apartment no longer contained the actress.

"Flight, either voluntary or involuntary, seems preposterous. The most amazing part of it all lies in the bewildering fact that it appears manifestly impossible that Miss Burton could have left the room — and yet the equal conviction that when search was made, she was gone.

"The actress had faded into ether — dissolved — ceased to exist.

"The case is in the hands of Madelyn Mack, who was on the stage at the time, and Lieutenant Byron of the Central Office. Neither professes to have obtained the slightest explanation of the astounding occurrence.

"Sewell Collins, retired secretary of the American Steel Company, and Miss Burton's fiance, has offered a reward of twenty thousand dollars for the return

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of the actress uninjured — or, in the event of foul play, a similar amount for the conviction of her assailants.

"It is the largest reward of its kind on record, and yet even its unusual amount has not resulted in the least progress in the untangling of the mystery.

"It has been learned that Miss Burton and Mr. Collins were to have been quietly married the latter part of next week, although she intended remaining on the stage the remainder of the season.

"Miss Isabelle Hunt, Miss Burton's understudy, finished the performance last night, and, for the present, will retain the position of leading woman of the company."

I read over my article in *The Bugle* in the Subway. Very cold and matter-of-fact, it looked in type, and utterly stripped of all the weirdness and uncanniness which had shrouded the event last night, and which had thrilled me when I sat down to the keys of my typewriter. Now, if Edgar Allan Poe had written *The Bugle* account, he would have built a masterpiece of shivers and quivers, and would have made the most wooden reader tingle with every thrill and near-thrill.

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I realized abruptly that I was not a genius!

Indeed, as I surveyed my article, the whole thing seemed absurd and ridiculous, rather than tinged with the suggestion of the supernatural that had seemed so vivid.

It sounded like the plot of a French detective story. Why — such things *couldn't* be in real life! It was well enough for a magician's illusion of the Vanishing Lady, or a trick for a spiritualistic seance, with false doors, and swinging mirrors, and subdued lights, and all that sort of thing. But we were not dealing either with magicians or spiritualists!

The next thing they would suggest would be that Ariel Burton's fairy godmother had given her an invisible cloak!

I could fancy that the whole town was snickering in its sleeve at us, and wondering whether we were confederates in some daring advertising hoax — or just plain dupes!

All of the papers, of course, mentioned, more or less sensationally, the incident of Ariel Burton's faint at the close of the first act. Most of them assigned the rather vague reason of over-strain from the tension of a "first night." None of them appeared to glimpse a deeper cause. In fact, with the climax that followed, the episode as a whole was dismissed rather lightly.

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The card of the purple thumb had obviously not yet been uncovered by the newspaper probe. And it had not needed Madelyn's suggestion to keep my own report silent on the subject. (It had not been the first time in our curious comradeship that I had seen a "scoop" smothered from motives of expediency!)

The first editions of the evening papers had nothing to add to the early morning accounts, unless it was the shrieking announcement of *The Buzzer* that its reporter, who had called on Sewell Collins for an interview, had been seized by the collar by that much-harried gentleman, and propelled by the toe of his house-slipper to the stairs of his apartment — and that the reporter was at once filing claims for fifty thousand dollars damages to his person and spirit!

I wondered curiously how the other members of the little stage-group at the Metropolitan, who had been enmeshed in the puzzle, were viewing it over the bridge of a night's sleep; what effect the dissecting rays of the morning after had had in dissipating the sharp-tensioned atmosphere of the evening.

I was in a wretched mood. I had not reached home from the office until after two o'clock, — only newspaper, theatrical, and society women can keep such hours! — and I had gathered only four

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hours of distorted sleep, in spite of the bromide the bell-boy had brought me from the all-night drug store.

To be quite truthful, I couldn't escape Thorny's face, staring at me from out of the darkness, with hateful, little blondined hussies scampering all about, and the enticing, black eyes of Ariel Burton bending over it!

I had spent most of the night with the wreck of my dreams. I had never realized before how precious they were, nor how much of myself had been crying out for them to come true!

If he had only given me some hint — instead of deliberately cementing our relations!

Why, only last Sunday we had stolen away, just we two, and had trudged five miles through the Westchester snows to the "*Maison Blanc*" — the quaint, little French inn, which we had always called our own discovery — and found its doors bolted, and its chimneys cold, and Madame gone, and had to stumble back to the traction without our dinner, and the memory of the fried chicken and Muscatelle we used to get aggravating our hunger. But we had laughed at it all, and Thorny had built a snow-man on the roadside and put a cigar in its mouth, and we had snow-balled each other like a couple of sky-larking kids, and he had

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promised me the best meal in town when we got back — and — now —— *this!*

Once I even climbed out of bed, and snatched Thorny's picture from the dresser, and held a match to it; but I only let the match burn my fingers! I hadn't the courage to do anything else — and then it was the only picture I had!

When I left the car at the suburban station, with a half a mile walk between me and "The Rosary," I was in a far from amiable mood. And the hour and a half ride in the Subway and Elevated had not improved it.

But the snap of the winter air could not be resisted. It was as tingling as champagne. — I sometimes think that a winter wind, chilled like wine to just the right temperature, is filled with celestial nectar for the benefit of just such harassed individuals as I was!

A lifeless sun was trying half-heartedly to combat the January blasts, which shrilled in from the cold, grey ice-mirror of the river. The naked line of maples flapped their leafless arms dismally at the edge of the long yard, which terraced gently back to the Swiss chalet, which Madelyn Mack termed "The Rosary."

Its gables looked drear enough against the slate sky. The ivy masses, clinging clear to the roof, were a rusty yellow. It could not have appeared

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more bleak had it been set down in the hollow of the Alps, where Madelyn had found the design from which she had copied it.

I pictured the rose garden in its rear a wind-swept square of shapeless bushes — with no hint of the gay masses of June bloom that were one of Madelyn's chief delights.

It was all very sweet, and gladsome, and enchanting enough against a summery background, but in the winter — ugh! But then Madelyn possessed the eccentricities of genius — and one of these, I presume, was in remaining by the skeletons of her summer glories.

The Quaker-like figure of Susan Bolton, Madelyn Mack's only companion, opened the door almost at once.

At my first glance behind the oaken portals, I forgot the bleakness outside. From the merrily bobbing streamers of Susan's cap to the merrily dancing flames in the open hall fireplace there was a sense of welcome so penetrating that I stood stock-still, breathing it in. The very warmth of it quickened my chilled blood. I was content just to stand there, smiling foolishly — and feel the spirit of the place go dancing up and down and into every crevice of my being.

Desolate? Why, the ice and the wind and the snow were just what was needed to form the set-

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ting for the picture, and make one appreciate it!

Susan Bolton pulled me, with a little, motherly tug, toward a wide, high-backed seat, heaped with the softest, cosiest cushions imaginable — and just near enough the fire to allow you to put your feet out comfortably before the crackling logs.

She was not content until she had divested me with her own hands of coat, and hat, and furs. Then, stepping back to a bubbling alcohol heater, she inverted its squat, little brass kettle, and poured me a huge cup of chocolate, so rich, and creamy, and mouth-watering that it made me gasp.

"Three lumps of sugar?" she smiled. "You see, I have a good memory, Miss Noraker!"

I glanced up from my cup — one of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old set of Delft that Madelyn Mack had brought from Amsterdam — and let my eyes rest again on Susan's beaming face.

It was one of those old-fashioned, grandmotherly faces, all smiles from the little, precise grey ringlets, peeping from under the frill of her cap, to the sunshiny eyes, looking as if they were wells of mother-love, deep enough to cover the whole world.

I put down my cup suddenly, sprang to my feet, and, throwing my arms around her neck, kissed her full on her astonished, cherry-red lips.

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"I just couldn't help it!" I said, stepping back. "Ah — that was *good!* I have been ***heart-hungry*** for months, and I didn't know what for!"

She studied my face for a moment silently. Those kindly grey eyes seemed suddenly very shrewd. She laid one of her soft, white hands on my shoulder. It was like velvet.

"Nora, girl, what is it?"

My first emotion was overwhelming surprise. I stood blinking, and choking, and thinking very fast — and then, well, I found my head pillowed on her shoulder, and sobbing as I had not sobbed for years.

I guess that my feverish night had worn my nerves more than I appreciated. Anyway, I realized that I was gasping out the whole wretched story of Thorny to her; that a pair of wonderful, grey eyes were holding mine like magnets; that a cool, soft hand was caressing my cheek — and that Nora Noraker, veteran newspaper woman of twenty-eight, was pouring out her heart like a love-sick girl of sixteen!

I should have been ashamed, I suppose; but I wasn't — a bit. And then my story came to an end, and the hand on my cheek slipped down on my shoulder, and for a long moment we stood silent.

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Susan gently turned me about, picked up my cup, and watched me until I drained it all.

"You feel better, don't you?"

I nodded, smiling in spite of myself.

A door at the end of the hall opened softly, and a small lithe figure, all in white, from her white buckskin shoes to her tailored, white serge skirt, and white India-silk blouse, stepped toward us, with a shaggy, brown Scotch collie at her heels, as under-sized as its mistress.

"This is the third time I have looked in on you two!" she said gaily. "Have you been to confessional, Nora?"

"Yes — to my mother-confessor," I smiled.

"And she has given you absolution? I knew she would. That is why I left you alone!"

Madelyn reached over and caressed Susan Bolton's wrinkled face, and then stooped down and patted the head of Peter the Great, the Collie.

She straightened, her mood abruptly hardening.

"I want your brain clear, Nora! I need you!" She turned. "Will you come into the den?"

Madelyn's arm slipped through mine. I glanced at her face, which scarcely reached to my shoulder, and realized that it was very tired, and worn, and that — yes, the abnormal sparkle in her eyes was too obvious!

My gaze dropped to the amethyst locket, dan-

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gling from a slender gold chain about her neck — her only ornament.

"You've been taking those horrid cola-berries again!" I charged.

"Don't be absurd, Nora! I needed them! I haven't been to bed for twenty-four hours!"

"You'll go to bed for good one of these days, if you keep up on stimulants like that!"

She shrugged wearily.

"Do you happen to know whether Ariel Burton was left-handed?"

"I wish you had never made that trip to South America," I said crossly, determined not to change the subject. "Then perhaps you would never have heard of the cola stimulant!"

Madelyn sighed.

"But was she?" she persisted in her turn.

"I don't know. Why?"

Madelyn curled down on the huge jaguar-skin before the den fireplace. — I think she had an open fire in nearly every room in the chalet.

Her arms circled about her knees, and she sat staring into the red and yellow flames, without reply.

My eyes roamed around the long, high-ceilinged room, its floor and walls littered with a collection of bric-a-brac to which the four corners of the earth had contributed, for, during her long vaca-

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tions, Madelyn Mack gave full play to her wanderlust, and had zig-zagged around the world a half a dozen times, always as far from the beaten paths of travel as she could penetrate. One year I had heard from her from the interior of China — it had taken three months for her dozen lines to reach me — and the next summer she had written me from the northern coast of Labrador.

But there was the touch of a woman's hand in the disorderly order of the room, in spite of the grim suggestiveness of certain of its prominent ornaments — the revolver with which the notorious Rudolph Morton had so nearly ended her life in underground Chinatown — the Indian bow-string, which had choked to death Peter Foxham — the stuffed cobra, whose fangs had come within an inch of Madelyn's arm in the Punjaub hills.

Nor was suggestion of our present problem lacking. On Madelyn's desk were the two anonymously threatening letters that had come to Ariel Burton, each with the purple-edged outlines of a human thumb below its typewritten lines. I started somewhat as I saw that the ornament of the golden butterfly, that we had found in the dressing-room, was being used as a paper-weight for them.

Although I had read the communications when Peterson entrusted them to Madelyn the night before, I picked them up again. To a newspaper

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reporter, accustomed to melodramatic demands of the Black Hand as commonplaces, often not worth even a first-page position, there was nothing particularly startling in either their text or their menace. Perhaps their most curious features were that they had evidently come from a writer of a fair degree of education — and that they made no mention of money.

I quote the first letter of a dozen lines verbatim:

> "You should know that I am not given to idle boasting. You have driven me to this method of approach, and I warn you in all fairness that, if you compel me, I will not hesitate at desperate measures. I am willing to give you a reasonable time for consideration, but I am prepared to strike at a moment's notice. On the whole, I do not think you will force me to a step which will mean final disaster to you."

The second communication was written from the same angle as the first, except for its concluding paragraph:

> "The first performance of your new play is scheduled for Wednesday night.

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Unless you assure me of a favorable answer, you will never finish it alive."

A favorable answer to what? I scanned the two letters in vain for some hint of light. There was no inkling of their purpose or why they were written. And there was neither signature nor address!

But for the curiously sketched outline of the human thumb, there were no marks of pen or pencil on either page. Both letters had been written by a black-ribboned typewriter. The envelopes bore the New York postmark of Madison Square Station, with dates a week apart.

When I turned, Madelyn had stepped to the telephone.

"Hello!" she called. "Is this the Lenox? Will you kindly connect me with Miss Ariel Burton's apartment? I know she's not there! Yes, her maid or her housekeeper will do."

She tapped the 'phone impatiently.

"Hello," she repeated. "Is this Miss Burton's housekeeper? This is Miss Mack — yes, Miss Madelyn Mack. I wish to ask you two questions. Was Miss Burton left-handed. . . . She was *not!* One thing more. Did she smoke cigarettes?"

Madelyn caught her breath suddenly.

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"You are *quite* sure she did not? Thank you." She hung up the receiver, frowning.

I stared across at her.

"Are you going to explain?"

"Explain what?"

"Those absurd questions, of course!"

"Maybe, you are right, Nora." Madelyn shrugged. "Perhaps they *were* absurd!"

I walked across the room, and then veered my queries to another angle.

"Well, how was it done?"

"How was *what* done?"

"How was Ariel Burton spirited from her dressing-room?" I snapped.

"My dear girl, there are three ways in which it could have been accomplished!" She stirred the logs in the fireplace.

"Three!" I gasped.

"But I am not going to explain until I know which of the three was used!"

I sighed resignedly. "What have you been doing all night?" I demanded.

She jerked her head toward the Circassian-walnut phonograph at her shoulder.

"Spending most of the time with half a dozen new records that Bartolli, the violinist, has just made for me. It took him about three hours, but he charged me six hundred dollars!"

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"What would you do if you didn't have all the money you could spend?" I asked cynically.

"Make more!" she responded promptly. She turned. "There is a stack of morning papers on the floor, Nora. Would you mind reading me their accounts of the case? The only article I have read is your own. If you would tone down your adjectives, you might write something worth while some day!"

I picked up the heap of folded papers submissively.

"Of course, you don't mean every word?" I laughed. "The papers have devoted as much space to the affair as to a presidential message!"

Madelyn stretched herself on the jaguar-skin, her hands under her head, her eyes staring at the ceiling.

"Yes, Nora — every line, if you don't mind! I fancy I have about an hour to spare!"

She closed her eyes, and I began my task with a wry face. I had always humored her through the five years of our curious friendship.

If Madelyn found any interest, however, either in the newspaper speculations or their heavy-leaded details of what was variously termed "The Riddle of the Vanishing Lady," "The Dressing-

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Room Mystery," and "The Burton Enigma," she did not show it; but I found that behind her closed eyes an alert brain was following me.

"Will you read that last paragraph again?" she said suddenly.

My eyes returned to the bottom of the page of *The Herald*. It was only a paragraph of a dozen lines, shoved into an inconspicuous spot as a "filler."

> "Of the history of Miss Ariel Burton, previous to her theatrical career, little or nothing is known.
>
> "It was a year and a half ago that Peter P. Peterson introduced her to Broadway in a minor role in Thorndyke Preston's first production, 'X. Y. Z.' A series of sudden and severe illnesses of several of the female members of the company elevated her in an unusually rapid manner — and her pronounced ability retained the successive steps which she had acquired by accident.
>
> "When Mr. Preston's second play, 'Mademoiselle Satan,' was produced six months ago, she was selected as its star, and later transferred to the stellar role in 'The Girl from Milwaukee.'

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"Mr. Peterson knows absolutely nothing of her life previous to the morning when, after three days of waiting in his anteroom, she obtained admittance to his office in search of a position. Who her relatives are, where her home was before the New York chapter of her life, are questions which no one seems able to answer. That she has demonstrated a wonderful stage ability, however amounting at times to almost genius, there can be no doubt.

"Miss Burton lived alone with her French maid and housekeeper in an expensive six-room suite on Riverside Drive. The flat was rented in her stage name, and her personal mail directed to that address. Whether in private life she has ever borne any other name is not known."

"Will you cut out that paragraph for me, Nora?" asked Madelyn. "You are not too tired to go on, are you?"

"Oh, no — it is a pleasure!" I said sarcastically, extending my hand toward the remainder of the papers.

But it did not reach them.

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A bell tinkled through the house, faintly, as though the hand on the button were not sure of itself.

We heard Susan's steps pattering toward the door in her loose slippers, and return with a second step beside her — light and shy.

The door of the den opened. The dark, liquid eyes of Miss Burton's French maid, Jacqueline, stared at us hesitatingly.

V

MADELYN was the first to speak.

"Come in," she invited as pleasantly as though she were occupying the most decorous position, instead of lying flat on her back on a tawny leopard skin in an attitude strongly suggestive of Cleopatra reposing on the trophies of her royal huntsmen.

Jacqueline's stare widened. I could quite understand her amazement, even after her association with such an unconventional person as a Broadway musical comedy star! Madelyn drew herself up leisurely and patted her hair, perhaps to give her caller opportunity to recover her poise, perhaps to ponder the reason of her unexpected visit. — Or was it unexpected? Madelyn's next words left me staring in my turn.

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"I thought you would be here by three at the latest!" she said quietly.

Jacqueline caught her breath, and I could see her fingers knot about the arms of her chair.

"But I have not received any more Purple Thumb communications," Madelyn continued.

The maid's gaze was riveted on the suddenly grave face of Miss Mack. Madelyn leaned forward.

"Don't you think you will save time if you take me into your confidence concerning what you know about Miss Burton, — that is, the things which you have not told the police?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I can be of service — now! If you choose to wait, it will probably be too late."

Jacqueline swept her hand over her eyes.

"Suppose you begin," suggested Madelyn briskly, "by telling me the meaning of the Purple Thumb!"

With a moan Jacqueline slipped from her chair to her knees.

"Merci, Madame, Merci! You mistake! It ees not that! It ees ze locked room I came to you about, *her* room!"

Madelyn almost roughly gripped her shoulder.

"If you are going to have hysterics, we will defer this interview until later."

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Jacqueline caught a handkerchief from her sleeve, penetrating with some heavy French scent, brushed it over her face, and somewhat sullenly resumed her seat. Her shoulders were shivering as if with cold.

"That is better," said Madelyn approvingly. "And now, if you will talk calmly, we shall help one another much sooner."

Jacqueline huddled back in her chair, evidently trying to collect her thoughts. In spite of her agitation, perhaps because of it, she made a striking picture in black and white, her pale features standing out hauntingly against the background of her somber gown and hair. And yet there was a curious underlying suggestion of piquancy, too, as though her French effervescence could not be entirely eliminated. — I verily believe that even in the tension of the situation, the minx never forgot that she looked well in black!

She looked up suddenly.

"It ees ze nerves, Madame! You — you must pardon. It has been one terrible nightmare — with ze door of Mademoiselle's room, ze locked door staring, staring at me all through ze night, and morning. I thought I would go mad! I won't go back! I can't go back!"

"And what has the door to do with it all?" demanded Madelyn curtly.

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"Do you not know? I mean ze door of Mademoiselle's bedroom, ze rose-chamber, which no one enters but herself, no, not even I! Always, it ees locked when she is gone, with ze little key, and again when she retires. Ever it has been so since my first day."

"And it is locked now?"

"Merci, Madame, and why not? Did I not see ze key turned with my own eyes, when Mademoiselle left for ze play? But, as I watched last night, ze door seemed to speak, to call to me, to command that I should find ze little key! Always it was calling! It was as though ze Evil One, himself, was ordering that I should obey!"

"Of course you did so?" Madelyn shrugged.

"Ze good saints protect us!" gasped the maid. "Open ze rose-chamber?" Her hand sketched the sign of the cross. "That ees what I came for you to do! They say there ees no woman so wise as Madame, none so brave!"

"You are alone in Miss Burton's apartments?" asked Madelyn abruptly.

"Alone but for Martha, ze housekeeper. But Martha, she ees made of wood. She knows nothing, feels nothing!"

"She was with you last night?"

"Part of it. She had asked Mademoiselle to go to Brooklyn to see her brother who ees ill, and she

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did not return until late. But Martha is old and wrinkled, and twelve of the night is as twelve of the noon to her! Once ze police came and asked ze impossible questions, and again this morning with more questions. But they are not like our gendarmes of ze boulevards! No, Madame. Red-faced and stupid they are — "

I think I saw the yellow face at the window at the same instant as Jacqueline. It was pressed against the frost-dimmed panes like a ghastly blur. Only for a flash it showed, a flash of black, boring eyes and scowling lips, and then it was gone, like a face swallowed in the fog. Madelyn's lithe figure leaped past my shoulders, and then, as she flung up the window and we peered into the yard, we were conscious of two facts.

Behind us, Jacqueline had crumpled to the floor as though felled by a physical blow. Ahead of us, across the snow-sheeted yard, a man was darting like a frightened rabbit, a slightly built man, rather under the average height, with a black felt hat crushed low over his face, and the skirts of a brown overcoat flapping about his legs. Even as we sighted him, he crashed through the winter skeleton of Madelyn's fat English hedge, and disappeared.

Madelyn sprang back from the window, her eyes gleaming.

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"Quick, Nora! This is a time when minutes count!"

"You are going to follow him?"

"Don't be absurd! We have a more important call to answer! Tell Susan to attend to Miss Jacqueline. I dare say she has only fainted. And have Andrew bring my car to the door. We'll have to chance the roads. It is the quickest way we can get to town!"

On occasions, Madelyn can muster an executive ability that seems to galvanize those about her like an electric battery. Even calmly moving Susan Bolton, and her slow-thinking husband, Andrew, respond to its thrill. In something under five minutes Madelyn's car was waiting, and we were springing into it. In the den, Susan's ministrations were already bringing Jacqueline back to returning consciousness. But we did not await the final result.

"I will telephone you within the hour — an hour and a half at the latest," called Madelyn from the door. "In the meantime, I shall depend on you to keep the young woman under your eye."

"But, if she wants to leave?" protested Susan.

"Tell her she does so at her peril! And now, Andrew, get us to Riverside Drive in thirty minutes if you have to smash the car!"

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"Riverside Drive!" I echoed. And then I knew. "We are going to Ariel Burton's apartments?" I cried.

"We are going to the rose-chamber and its locked door," said Madelyn as she settled herself in her seat. And that was the last word she spoke during our thirty-five minutes of zig-zagging through the crunching snow, bumping over ice-crusted ruts, and grazing crumbling ditches. Twice we skirted disaster so close that my breath stopped, but Madelyn sat buried in her robes without the slightest sign that she had noticed the fact. It was not until the straggling outskirts of the city grew into close-packed blocks that she roused, and then it was only to give the direction to Andrew. We swerved our course across to the Drive, and brought up finally before the brown stone front of the Lenox apartment building, in one of whose five-thousand-dollar suites Miss Ariel Burton made her home.

Madelyn was out of the dazzlingly upholstered elevator almost before the liveried attendant opened the door at the third floor. Miss Burton's apartment was a front corner suite, obviously one of the most expensive and desirable in the building. Madelyn's finger came away impatiently from the entrance bell. She was about to repeat her summons, when the door opened, and a rather grim-

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visaged woman of perhaps sixty stood staring at us.

Madelyn thrust out one of her cards and elbowed unceremoniously past her.

"You are Martha, I take it! Which is Miss Burton's bedroom?"

It was a tribute to the personality of Miss Mack that no sign of protest answered her. The housekeeper fell back.

"The last room to the right!" she gasped.

A long hall extended from the front to the rear of the suite with a series of three rooms on either side. Not only the hand of wealth, but of art, was apparent even in our first swift survey. If Ariel Burton's judgment had dictated the furnishings of her home, she was quite apparently a connoisseur.

Through a blue-and-gold music-room, and a white-and-gold library and living-room combined, we made our way. In the farther wall was a door, almost concealed by overhanging tapestries. Madelyn paused, and, with a tightening of her lips, stepped forward.

"Will it have to be broken in?" I asked, startled at the hoarseness of my voice.

"Unless the lock is a patent one, I fancy I can manage."

Madelyn stooped, and caught the knob. I could hear her breath quicken as she fumbled with the

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handle and then bent toward the keyhole. She straightened again, and from her hand-bag produced an oddly curved bit of wire. For two or three minutes she twisted it to and fro in the lock. With a sigh of surrender she stepped back.

There was silence as she gazed at the panels reflectively.

"I'm afraid, Nora, we will have to use force after all!" She whirled toward the housekeeper. "Get the janitor and tell him to come up at once, and bring a man with him!"

The servant stumbled toward the hall. Madelyn picked up a book on the library table and toyed with it mechanically. We were rather evading one another's eyes. The suggestion of impending evil, of strange, hidden things, had fallen on the room like a blanket. I moved my gaze from the locked door, only to find it drawn back again like a magnet. In the back of my mind I saw again the picture of the hysterical French maid, heard again her gasping voice:

"But as I watched, ze door seemed to speak, to call to me, to command that I should find ze little key! Always it was calling! It was as though the Evil One, himself, was ordering that I should obey!"

From the hall came the tramping of feet, a heavy voice. But it was not the janitor and his

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assistant. In the doorway Lieutenant Byron and a plain-clothes man stood gazing at us inquiringly.

Madelyn stepped forward with a quick shrug of relief, and spoke a dozen crisp sentences. The lieutenant's grey eyebrows wrinkled, but he was not a man to waste questions — when the need for action was calling. With a nod to his subordinate, he swung across the floor. The two men braced themselves and then lunged together. Door-breaking is an essential part of a policeman's education!

The second onslaught was successful. The wrecked panels fell suddenly inward.

A glimpse of rose-red tinted walls, and velvet rugs, and mahogany dressing table swam before me — a silken canopied bed and Irish lace counterpane — a wonderful embroidered negligee tossed carelessly across the surface — and nothing else.

VI

THIS was our first swift impression like the flash of a stereopticon slide on a blank canvas.

And then Madelyn's slight, black-gowned figure was darting across the room. The pink-shaded silken draperies, concealing the opposite door, were

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still swaying from the impact of the fleeing figure that had dashed through them almost at the moment of our entrance.

Madelyn tore aside the draperies, caught the knob. The routed occupant of the rose-chamber had turned the key!

Lieutenant Byron brushed her aside, hurled himself against the panels. The plain-clothes man joined him in the second assault. In the din of the wreckage, we sprang over the falling door into a rear corridor, ending in a winding flight of back stairs, obviously for the servants' use.

As we rushed to the stairs, a girlish, blue-skirted figure, with a loosened coil of blond hair, under a white fur toque, whisked from the landing below. When we reached the second floor corridor it was empty.

Six locked doors confronted us — and the last flight of the stairs. A glance was sufficient to eliminate this latter exit. The girl in blue had found haven behind one of the series of doors. Lieutenant Byron's knuckles beat an angry summons on each in turn. An icy-faced butler, and a maid-servant, holding a curling-iron to her scanty bangs, replied to two of the calls with a wonderment too obvious to be counterfeited. Silence answered at the remaining four panels. A continuation of our strenuous tactics above was, of

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course, out of the question. For the time, at least, we were balked.

Lieutenant Byron's curt order to his assistant to watch the lower entrance, and to telephone headquarters for a second man at the other side of the building, was more of a formality than a hope. The Lenox probably contained a dozen blonde women of girlish figures.

We made a gloomy quartette as we re-traced the path of our precipitate chase. I think Lieutenant Byron took the escape of our quarry as a personal affront. There was a suggestion of grimness even in the measured tread of his steps as we came again to the splintered door, and to the gaping figure of the housekeeper, still staring as though she had not changed a muscle since she had seen us disappear.

I caught Madelyn's arm as the lieutenant tugged at the door. She smiled quizzically at the question in my eyes, with a finger to her lips. I had not been alone, then, in my recognition of Miss Gwendolyn Calvert as she plunged down the back stairs!

I shrugged helplessly, as Lieutenant Byron leaned the wrecked door against the wall. What had brought our garrulous, chorus-girl friend to the chamber of Ariel Burton? What motive had inspired her wild flight before our approach? I was floundering in a mental quagmire. Most em-

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phatically our riddle was deepening rather than clearing.

The lieutenant brought the matter-of-fact element back to the situation with a movement typical of the unemotional police-angle of view. Striding across the room, he jerked up the half-lowered window shades to their full height.

Madelyn had paused by the side of the bed, her gaze slowly digesting the details of the chamber. Now, with the flood of light, we could see that its luxury was not so heavy nor so glaring as to smother its suggestion of cosy cheeriness. It was just such a nook as I had occasionally allowed myself to dream of in my fanciful moments.

It was with something like a start that I found my thoughts circling back to the cloud of presentiment that had shadowed us as the police shoulders forced an entrance for us. Soberly I tried to diagnose its cause. And then, quite suddenly, it came to me that none of us would have been surprised if the room had shown us the trail of tragedy — if the chamber had revealed the murdered body of Ariel Burton!

The curt interrogations of Lieutenant Byron interrupted my thoughts.

"The back hall, then, was the only means by which an intruder could have entered Miss Burton's room?" he snapped at the housekeeper.

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"Yes, sir!" she returned dully. "I have been here since last night, that is, in the other part of the flat. I never had a key to Miss Burton's own chamber. I — I hope you don't think, sir, that I —"

The lieutenant bent over the lock of the rear door. Even from a distance, I could see that it was of the same peculiar pattern as the first lock which had balked Madelyn — a peculiar design which few experts could have forced. And there were no signs that it *had* been forced!

There came a lull as we slowly filed back to Miss Burton's white-and-gold living-room. In one corner bulked a heavy, square theatrical trunk, plastered with criss-crossing labels, jarringly conspicuous against the luxurious background.

"Miss Burton's trunk, the one she sent from the theatre last night," explained the housekeeper, in answer to Madelyn's inquiring glance.

I stared as I recalled the two men staggering from the dressing-room with their burden shortly before the star had made her appearance for the second act.

"Oh, we have examined it thoroughly, Miss Mack!" said the lieutenant with a flash, as Madelyn tapped its edge. "If you are trying to connect it with the case, though," he added with a laugh, "I am afraid you have struck a blind lead! Your

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own evidence shows that Miss Burton was in the theatre long after the trunk had left!"

Madelyn smiled faintly. "And you will find my evidence quite correct! Our vanished friend was not hidden in the trunk, I assure you!" There was a hint of suppressed raillery in her voice.

"You examined it anyway, notwithstanding my testimony?"

"That was one of the first things I did when I reached the flat last night. It was filled with gowns enough to stock a store. There wasn't a quarter inch of space left! Lord, Miss Mack, that woman certainly does have clothes! If Mrs. Byron ever sighted the contents of that trunk, I couldn't get her away with a yoke of oxen. If you want to take a look yourself —"

"No, thank you." With an air of detachment, Madelyn turned to a telephone in the opposite corner.

A book-strewn stand was drawn up before a grate of gas-logs at the side of one of those fat, old-fashioned arm-chairs, which seem a constant invitation to procrastination. It was my own particular Nemesis which led me at this juncture to the stand, and a magazine turned down in the center. An illustrated article on "Successful American Playwrights" rewarded my curiosity. From the very first page the face of Thorny Pres-

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ton grinned up at me. It was the same picture he had given me, the snap-shot made during an October afternoon gallop the autumn before. Underneath was the staring caption:

"This picture was taken by Miss Ariel Burton, the leading lady, who has scored such a pronounced success in Mr. Preston's productions."

I flung the magazine savagely back, conscious that Lieutenant Byron was staring at me. I could understand now why Mr. Preston had called it his favorite picture! Doubtless there was a presentation copy in the most intimate corner of his own room, more than likely with some such inscription as, "Lovingly Yours, Ariel"!

A gradual deepening in the tension of the room made itself felt even through my bitterness. Madelyn was still at the telephone. She was seesawing the hook of the receiver savagely.

"There must be a mistake, Central! You are sure you have the number right? And there is no answer?"

Madelyn whirled from the instrument.

"Ring the elevator, Nora! Quick! If we are too late —" She broke off, her nails cutting into her palms, and then burst out again, "If they have dared to injure so much as a hair of her head, I call you all to witness that I shall make them pay — pay dearly! Oh, I have been blind, blind!"

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Lieutenant Byron gripped her arm.

"Calm yourself, Miss Mack! What is it?"

Madelyn darted after me.

"It means," she flung back, "that I have fallen for the first simple bait dangled before my eyes! And I call myself a detective!"

One glance at Madelyn's face sent Andrew jumping toward the crank-shaft. Madelyn sprang into the car, and then leaped to her feet again.

"Are your fingers made of wood, man? Susan — Susan, your wife, is in peril!"

Andrew fell back, choking.

"God, Miss Mack! What — what is it?"

"I don't know! That's the worst!"

A sullen chugging broke from the engine. Andrew jumped to the wheel, the car swerved sharply, and we were dashing down the frozen pavement of the Drive.

I clutched Madelyn's shoulders as we grazed a taxicab and passed it, with the driver cursing after us.

"Is it the yellow-faced man we saw at the window?"

Madelyn glared.

"Nora, I believe you have been as blind as I was! Can't you see yet the game Jacqueline was playing? Haven't your eyes been opened to the wild-goose chase she gave us — and its purpose?"

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"No," I said glumly, "they haven't!"

"Then," retorted Madelyn, with a touch of grimness, "your eye-opening will have to wait!"

And she dropped the conversation. Occasionally I stole a glance at her slight, drawn-faced figure; but there was no further hint of confidences — or apprehensions. There are times when Madelyn's silence is glacial!

I huddled back in the robes and closed my eyes in an effort to concentrate on the kaleidoscope of the past three hours. And then I opened them in the hope that the sun would dispel something of my mental daze. Jacqueline's visit — her terror-stricken story — the yellow face at the window — our dash to the Lenox — the assault on the locked door — the intruder in the rose-chamber — our unsuccessful pursuit — and now this last climax! And apparently we were drifting farther and farther from the heart of the riddle!

With a reckless disregard of skidding, Andrew whirled the car into the snow-crusted driveway of "The Rosary." We made a dishevelled trio as we plunged into the long front hall, already darkened by the late afternoon shadows. A dying log in the grate fell apart with a crackle of sparks — and then, in the circle of its momentary radiance, we saw that which told us our wild ride had not been for nothing.

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Madelyn had Susan's head in her lap before Andrew and I could cross the room. From the position of her body, it was evident that the housekeeper had slipped down from a rocker, drawn into the glow of the fire. A stocking, wrapped about an old-fashioned darning-gourd, lay on the floor at her side. Around her hung the odor of chloroform.

Madelyn's curt order for water was not necessary. The bluish lips were already twitching, as Andrew's match caught the hall gas.

With a sigh of relief, Madelyn thrust a cushion under Susan's head, motioned Andrew to remain at her side, and darted into the den. In the doorway we stumbled over the second evidence of the drug-trail. Peter the Great lay stiffly on his side, breathing with a heaviness which it was apparent that nothing for the present could break.

In the room, beyond, the purpose of the chloroform assailant was obvious. An impatient hand had torn open drawers, and file cases, strewn the floor with papers, and even jerked pictures from the walls and books from their shelves. A desperate search had been made of Miss Mack's sanctum for — what?

Madelyn's lips tightened as her hand reached into her waist and produced a long, unsealed envelope.

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"I had thought Miss Jacqueline *might* be interested in the letters of the Purple Thumb — but I didn't fancy her interest was so deep!"

She surveyed the littered room with a shrug.

"On the whole, I should say, though, that she has rather overbalanced the damage to my papers by the service she has rendered me!"

"Service!" I cried.

Madelyn shrugged again.

"I fear I had not been giving the Purple Thumb its proper importance in our little tangle!"

VII

SUSAN BOLTON'S story, when a half hour later saw the haze of the drug somewhat diminished, was the narration of an absurdly simple stratagem. Melodramatic features in Miss Jacqueline's methods were signally lacking.

Recovering from her swoon shortly after our departure, the maid had gratefully accepted Susan's suggestion of a cup of chocolate. The hospitality gave her an opportunity which she used to swift advantage. As Susan returned the emptied cup to the stand, a pair of lithe arms encircled her neck. For a moment, she had a glimpse of a soaked sponge and a pair of dark eyes. The drugging of Peter the Great had probably been accomplished

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quite as easily. It was an hour after Susan's recovery that he staggered dazedly back to his favorite rug in the den.

I have often wondered since if that final scene in our drama, toward which unconsciously we were already rushing, would have been quite the same had Jacqueline, the burglarious, given the canine bodyguard of "The Rosary" a fatal whiff of her drugged sponge — if, for instance, Madelyn would have ventured her last, supreme risk in that life-or-death climax with the same readiness! It was obvious, at once, that our crafty visitor had made a clueless retreat. Doubtless she had taken her time in her futile search, perhaps made an unconcerned departure through the front door!

Nor was there further trail of the prowler of the yellow face. The shadows had already veiled the trail of his footsteps across the snow when Madelyn circled her flashlight from the window where we had glimpsed his blurred features. There was evidence in plenty to show where he had stood. Evidently he had maintained his vigil for some minutes before discovery, but there were no signs of returning steps, either here, or elsewhere in the yard, although we rounded the chalet twice.

On our return from our fruitless exploration, Madelyn cleared her desk with a rather ruthless sweep, rummaged for a magnifying lens, and pro-

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duced again the two letters of the Purple Thumb. For a silent ten minutes she studied them.

"Have you noticed anything distinctive about these documents, Nora?" she asked abruptly. "Anything, for instance, which would induce a person to adopt desperate tactics to gain their possession?"

I shook my head doubtfully.

"The police receive a score of such communications every day."

Madelyn leaned back, the tips of her fingers musingly together.

"And yet we face two decidedly puzzling details. The letters give no hint of signature or address, although the writer emphatically expects an answer. And Miss Burton told a palpable untruth when she declared she had received no others, unless, unless —

"Suppose we begin at the outset of to-day's events, and recall them in their proper sequence," she broke off. "We have first Jacqueline's visit. We know now that its purpose was to lure me away, obviously that a search might be made of my papers. For what? Plainly for Miss Burton's letters, since they are the only documents I possess bearing on the case. And yet, so far as we have been able to see, the letters contain nothing to warrant such an effort. There remain, then, two con-

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clusions: the communications possess a hidden message which we have not yet discovered, or their point is supplemented in some other fashion. In either event, we have not found their true significance — *and it is not intended that we should!*

"But it is equally evident that, if we are in ignorance of their concealed meaning, there are several who have a closer knowledge. There is the maid, Jacqueline, the yellow-faced gentleman at the window, and, finally, the show-girl, Gwendolyn Calvert. And, I should say, each is acting independently of the others. We have then three distinct lines of convergence. That is our most hopeful fact, Nora. Those lines are *bound* to meet, sooner or later!"

"Then one of those factors must have been instrumental in Miss Burton's disappearance!" I broke in.

"You are assuming too much!" said Madelyn testily. "You forget that Miss Burton's vanishing could have been voluntary as well as involuntary. Grant that there were certain menacing elements directed against her, elements which may even have conspired for her removal. They may have been successful in their purpose — or they may have failed. Miss Burton may have disappeared of her own accord — to elude them!"

"And in that event — "

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"Her escape has been successful, so successful that the forces she has evaded are as interested in finding her as we are!"

"And they are seeking to destroy the letters of the Purple Thumb because they contain a clue to their purpose!" I interjected.

"Perhaps!" said Madelyn drily. "And perhaps there is another explanation. Miss Jacqueline may have been acting not for the writer — but for the recipient! If Ariel Burton disappeared of her own accord, you must remember that she disappeared from her friends, as well as from her enemies — and she may not desire either to locate her!"

I stared. "Then the letters — " I burst out.

"Contain a guide to the solution of the riddle, which we have not yet found," answered Madelyn wearily. She turned. "Nora, will you kindly start the phonograph for me? Put on the ballet music from 'Faust.' Thank you! I believe you have your article yet to write for *The Bugle,* haven't you? You will find a comfortable table and an excellent light in the living-room!"

"Which means bluntly — " I retorted.

"That I want to be alone for the next hour!"

I found that Susan had been assisted up to her own chamber. The living-room was deserted. I drew a chair to its table, moved a pad of paper

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over to my elbow, and then sat uncertainly, tapping my fountain pen. From the closed door of Madelyn's den rippled the ballet strains of "Faust," a pause, and then the melody continuing. Madelyn had evidently started the record over again. With an effort, I tried to throw off the suggestion that persisted in intruding into my thoughts. Miss Mack had enumerated three persons interested in the riddle of the Purple Thumb. She had overlooked a fourth. Had she forgotten Thorny Preston — and the card in the white orchids?

It was seven when I finished my last paragraph. I glanced up with a sigh to see Madelyn facing me, with hat and coat on.

"It is twenty minutes over the hour I mentioned. Are you ready for another trip to town?"

"Where, this time?" I demanded. "Dinner?"

"Perhaps," she returned drily.

At the door, she turned back and dropped into her pocket an object that gleamed coldly in the light. Most emphatically it was a curious dinner that called for the accompaniment of a revolver!

As we settled into a seat in the Subway-train, Madelyn spread out a copy of *The Bugle* which she drew from her bag, and her face disappeared behind its pages. I stared through the window for perhaps ten minutes, and then I broke the silence with an ironical grin.

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"You seem to find an absorbing interest in the newspaper accounts of the case, Miss Mack!"

"Do you think so?" Madelyn said pleasantly, without lifting her eyes.

I leaned closer. And then I saw that the date of the paper was more than a week before!

Madelyn's gaze met mine with a provoking gleam as I leaned back. She was actually chuckling at me!

"Are you interested in psychology, Nora? Then here is a little problem that may help to relieve the tedium of our ride. What is the natural channel of communication of a blackmailer, not educated up to a cipher, and yet who wishes to keep his point of attack in the background?"

I opened my lips to protest, but Madelyn had again retreated behind the paper. On the whole, I was not surprised when we left the Subway in the neighborhood of the Lenox — but the fashionable apartment building was not our immediate destination.

Madelyn turned into a quiet-fronted residence hotel on one of the cross streets near upper Broadway, and approached the desk with an air of business-like briskness.

"I believe that Mr. Sebastian Amador is registered here. Will you kindly tell him that the lady he is expecting has arrived?"

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The clerk ran a finger over the bookkeeper's day-book.

"Mr. Amador paid his bill and left an hour ago, madam."

Madelyn caught her breath.

"Did he leave a forwarding address?"

The clerk consulted a slip at his elbow.

"I find none, madam."

Before the sentence was completed, Madelyn was dragging me into the street. As she darted through the doorway she sighted a taxicab at the curb.

"The Lenox!" she flung to the driver, and pushed me into a seat as we swerved toward the river.

I subsided against the cushions as we sped across Broadway, grazing the end of a clanging surface car with hardly a foot to spare.

"And who is Sebastian Amador?" I gasped, finding my breath.

"The gentleman who paid us a call this afternoon," she snapped, "but who was in too much of a hurry to come in!"

A bump in the pavement threw us against the side of the car.

"Why the Lenox now?" I jerked out.

"Because I must know at once whether Ariel Burton disappeared of her own volition, — and, if

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so, whether the danger she eluded is still threatening her!"

A curious exhilaration was sweeping through my blood. It was the wild throb of the man-chase. Again I could see the blurred, yellow face at the window, the fainting form of the French maid. What sinister trail were we following, and where would it end? Had Miss Mack read the message of the Purple Thumb? And what had it told her?

With an order to the chauffeur to wait, Madelyn sprang across the walk toward the brown-stone front of the Lenox, only slightly slackening her steps as we passed into the marble and gilt splendor of its hall. Martha answered our bell with a swift change of expression, ludicrous under other circumstances. It was as though she viewed our arrival as the forerunner of another climax like that of the afternoon!

It was easy enough to see, as we passed in the white-and-gold living-room, that the housekeeper was regarding us with scant favor. Her suspicion almost turned to open protest with Madelyn's first action.

Darting across the room, Miss Mack pressed the electric switch in the wall and plunged us into darkness.

"That is better!" she said. "And now, Martha, will you kindly extinguish the other lights?"

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The housekeeper bridled.

"Really, ma'am, you —"

"Are you going to do as I ask you?" snapped Madelyn. The superior will won. A moment later, Miss Burton's flat showed no signs of occupancy. As the lights of the hall disappeared, Madelyn's electric search-lamp sent a flickering circle into the shadows of the living-room, swerved across the apartment, and focused on the gaunt bulk of the theatrical trunk in the corner.

"By the way, Martha, I believe you told me this afternoon that Miss Burton is right-handed. She had trained herself, however, to use *either* hand on occasion, had she not?"

"Why, er, come to think of it, ma'am, she had. Why do you ask?"

Madelyn made no answer, as she thrust the tube of the flashlight into my hands.

"I'll leave the illumination with you, Nora. I can manage our next task more expeditiously than you can!"

Thrusting back the heavy trunk-cover, she began a ruthless removal of the close-packed garments within. I could hear Martha's unheeded protest as the finery of one of the most expensive theatrical wardrobes on Broadway was sent into a pell-mell heap on the floor. Paris and London gowns fol-

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lowed filmy negligees and lingerie with a reckless disregard of damage.

There came a gradual slackening in the whirl of silken lace, more and more apparent, and then a low, quick gasp of elation.

I slanted the light down over Madelyn's shoulder, my breath quivering. What discovery had inspired Miss Mack's gasp of sudden triumph?

Over the edge of the trunk my light lowered, down the riveted sides on to — the smoothly cleared bottom, as barren as a clean-swept platter. Blank emptiness. That was all!

I gasped in my turn at the anti-climax.

"We have unraveled one phase of the riddle, Nora! Ariel Burton's disappearance was entirely voluntary!"

I stared at Madelyn's shadowy face.

"But there was nothing in the trunk!" I protested. "Absolutely nothing — except clothes! Besides, you, yourself, said that Miss Burton didn't vanish in the trunk!"

"And I was right! She didn't!" Madelyn returned crisply. "But that isn't the vital point. Ariel Burton disappeared to escape a fate that was almost upon her. And the menace, from which she slipped, *still exists!*"

A steel-muscled arm darted over my shoulder, gripping my hand and the tube of the flashlight.

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The yellow circle dancing across the bottom of the trunk snapped into darkness. And then, as I realized that the arm belonged to Madelyn, I caught the sound of footsteps through the doorway beyond, the hiss of hoarse breathing — and knew that we were no longer alone in the shadows.

The invasion of the rose-chamber was being repeated. Dimly, through the portieres, I saw a bead of light. Ours was not the only searchlight in Ariel Burton's apartments that night.

Madelyn's arm over my shoulder drew back. I could feel her body quiver with suppressed tension, and then she was worming her way across the floor, her black-gowned figure blotted out by the darkness. I caught a flash of her hand at a corner of the portieres; but it was only a flash. At the same instant, the searchlight in the other room splintered to the floor to the accompaniment of a woman's scream, that was not Madelyn's. There was a scuffling of feet, a guttural, foreign-sounding oath, and, at the end, the bark of a revolver, like the yelp of a kicked dog.

I dashed across the living-room, throwing back the portieres in a kind of frenzy. A glare of light struck my eyes. Some one had found the electric switch, and made use of it. I saw that I had come in time for only the tag end of the drama in the dark.

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A man in a light overcoat and black felt hat was plunging through the farther doorway into the rear hall. To his right arm was clinging the frail form of Miss Mack. He turned snarlingly, revealing a pair of close-set, gleaming eyes and, below them, the yellow face that had peered at us through the window of "The Rosary"!

For an instant the two swayed, and then Madelyn was flung back against a chair, and the skirts of the overcoat disappeared like a brownish streak. Before I could reach her side, Madelyn was springing into the hall in unshaken pursuit.

It was then that I became aware of another occupant of the room. A disheveled young man in evening clothes was leaning dazedly against the opposite wall. On the tip of his ear twisted a thread of blood like a red raveling.

"The beggar almost winged me!" gasped Thorny Preston, half turning. "Another fraction of an inch —"

His sentence dwindled in the middle as he recognized me. For a moment we stood staring at one another. I knew that my face had gone white, and that I was reaching out mechanically to find something to steady myself, as though the feel of a solid surface under my hand would steady also the whirl of my thoughts. Thorny Preston added to the marauders of Ariel Burton's apartments! Thorny

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Preston one of the prowlers of the rose-chamber, in search of — what?

And then he put an end to my speculations by lurching forward into a chair, and fainting almost literally in my arms. And being human — and a woman — everything promptly fled from my universe except the trickle of blood on his neck and his closed eyes.

His swoon, however, was not so serious as its dramatic nature might have warranted. Even before the water, which Martha brought in sort of submissive terror, reached me, his eyes were fluttering. As I pressed the glass to his lips, Madelyn stepped back from the corridor.

"We have lost our birds again! Twice now."

Thorny sat up weakly in his chair. Madelyn's eyes narrowed on his face.

"As an amateur burglar, Mr. Preston, I should advise you to make sure next time that you are not shadowed — particularly by a gentleman of Spanish blood! I should have associated a knife, however, rather than a gun with Señor Amador!"

"Amador?"

Thorny's eyes gleamed, and he made a movement to rise. Madelyn pushed him back.

"I scarcely think there is occasion for hurry! I fancy you will find Miss Calvert has made a secure retreat!"

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The dull flush again swept Thorny's face. I could feel him glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. So my half-fancy of a woman's figure darting into the hall, as I burst into the room, had been correct! Mr. Preston then had formed a partnership with Gwendolyn Calvert in his nocturnal expedition!

Madelyn gazed at him a minute in silence.

"Don't you think the psychological moment has come for frankness on your part?"

Thorny was staring at the floor. I could understand that his head must be ringing from the shock of the wound, but there were evidently other causes for his perturbation. He presented all the appearance of a very much ill-at-ease young man.

"For instance," continued Madelyn, "the errand that made it necessary for Miss Calvert and yourself to descend to burglar tactics?"

Thorny drew a deep breath.

"I am not at liberty to answer that question, Miss Mack!"

"Then, perhaps, I can answer it for you!"

Thorny's glance raised, and then lowered almost stubbornly. A somewhat harder note crept into Madelyn's voice.

"I don't know whether Miss Calvert saw you personally, or telephoned the message that brought you to her aid. In any event, she told you that

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Ariel Burton's welfare depended upon prompt and secret action. By the way, was Miss Calvert's friend on the second floor, who came to her assistance, the butler or — "

"She was using the apartment of her cousin, who is in Europe," snapped Thorny, "number eight! She found accidentally that the same keys fitted the doors up here."

"That explains, then, her prompt disappearances. As to what happened after you reached Miss Burton's apartments, the details are fairly obvious — your grapple with your unseen assailant, Miss Calvert's flight — I regret, Mr. Preston, that you did not have opportunity to complete your mission! We will retire, if you desire to finish it now!"

Thorny staggered to his feet.

"Then, for God's sake, tell me how!"

Even Madelyn stared.

"You mean — "

"I mean that we were to find in this room that which would explain Ariel Burton's vanishing, but what it was I have no more idea than you have! Gwen Calvert knew. I guess she had been here before. Just as she was opening her lips to explain to me — well, you know what happened. I was seized from behind, and she was running back into the corridor, screaming!" Thorny moistened

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his lips. "The key to the whole affair is in this room, Miss Mack — between these four walls!"

Madelyn paced across the floor. Something cold and hard had come into her face — like the glint of the spent fighter who sees his antagonist suddenly re-inforced.

"Is it a letter, Mr. Preston — a letter of the Purple Thumb?"

"It is not!" came the decisive answer. "Gwen Calvert knew almost as little about those letters as I did. I knew, of course, they were throwing Miss Burton into a blue funk, that they were preying on her mind fearfully; but she gave me no inkling of what was behind them. It was not until this evening that I found from Gwen —"

"You must meet me frankly, Mr. Preston!"

Thorny bit his lips.

"— That they were written by this Spanish chap!" he continued abruptly.

"I guess Amador had been trying to make a tool of Gwen, using her to keep him posted on Miss Burton's movements, and in the end she decided to investigate on her own account. But he was like an iceberg whenever she mentioned the letters."

"You are quite sure you are speaking plainly?"

"Quite sure!"

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"Then what about the card in Miss Burton's bouquet that you concealed from us?"

Thorny flushed.

"I saw only the *blank* side when I picked it up! I was as much surprised as you at what was on the other side!" He hesitated. "Gwen Calvert overheard me reading aloud the letter that came to Miss Burton at our last rehearsal. It threatened to kill her unless she married the writer without delay. Gwen even thought I was making the threat on my own account!" He broke off. "This is awful, Miss Mack! Surely something can be done — *it must be done!* Gwen Calvert was in white earnest when she called me to-night. The explanation of the riddle is in this apartment, and we have got to find it!"

"But it is apparent, Mr. Preston, that we cannot make a search until we know what we are seeking. You must locate Gwendolyn Calvert and force her to tell me her story!"

"But —"

Madelyn gripped his arm.

"No woman in New York is facing a more genuine peril than Ariel Burton to-night! If, for any reason, Miss Calvert cannot, or will not, talk, our last chance of aiding her is gone!"

Through the silence of the flat pealed the hall bell. We could hear Martha answering the sum-

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mons with mechanical obedience. Then sounded a crisp voice, and Lieutenant Byron's "plain clothes" assistant of the afternoon stood frowning at us. His eyes narrowed at Madelyn's figure.

"Miss Mack, can you step down-stairs, please?"

For a moment none of us spoke. There was that in his voice and face which sent an almost indefinable tautness through the room. It was as though we had caught the first, faint note of a far-off alarm bell.

Madelyn stepped to the officer's side. His voice lowered, and we could see her recoil. Then Thorny and I were racing at her shoulder into the hall — Thorny forgetful of the shock of his wound — and Madelyn's finger was jabbing at the elevator bell.

There was no answer, and we were soon to see the reason. In a panting trio, we stumbled down the last flight of stone stairs.

A background of marble and gilt splendor — a dazzle of lights — huddled groups of theatre-bound parties, filmy-cloaked women and silk-hatted escorts—liveried servants—all staring grotesquely, for it was the first time that most of them had been brought face to face with tragedy.

On a leather divan, Gwendolyn Calvert, with a little crimson splotch like a dash of red ink on her white shirtwaist, lay staring back at them with a

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sort of dazed bewilderment still showing through the film of death.

"She was shot down on the walk at the corner of the building!" jerked out Lieutenant Byron. "Tall, dark man in a light overcoat fired the bullet. He has made a clean get-a-way — so far!"

VIII

I HAVE often questioned whether any one but Madelyn Mack could have accomplished what followed. Lieutenant Byron maintains that she did it because she was a woman. I differ with him. Feminine psychology may have been a factor, but it was nothing less than genius in the final analysis.

The lieutenant held us for a moment on the edge of the group.

"It happened right under our eyes, Miss Mack! If we —"

"I can guess how it happened!" said Madelyn. She thrust past him, and caught the arm of a man, evidently a physician, at the divan.

"We must keep her alive for sixty seconds longer, Doctor! *We must!*"

"She is gone now!"

The physician gave a professional shrug. And then, as though to belie his words, the girl's staring eyes trembled, and her lips partly opened.

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"If I had an electric battery," the doctor hesitated, "I might do what you ask, madam; but without it, it is impossible!"

Madelyn bent lower over the white face. And then, as the doctor drew back with a suggestion of tolerance, occurred the miracle.

"Gwen, girlie! Gwen, I say!"

It was not Madelyn Mack, the inquisitor, pleading with a witness; but a show-girl appealing to one of her kind. Had Miss Mack spent an apprenticeship in a Broadway chorus, her voice could not have acquired more perfectly the vibrant, metallic tones of the footlights. Even phlegmatic Lieutenant Byron was staring incredulously.

"Gwen, I say, don't you hear the call-bell? Let the rest of your make-up go! Do you want the stage-manager to fine you?"

At Madelyn's shoulders we were bent forward, our eyes held to the face on the divan. Would the daring expedient of psychology win over death? Would the old, familiar call of the stage re-animate the dying will of the show-girl when medical stimulants had failed?

Again the grey lips moved, again the eyes trembled, and then a wave of animation, like the spurt of a fading fire, illumined their depths. Madelyn had won! I could see her muscles stiffen as she stooped still lower. It was as though she

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would hold death at bay by sheer physical strength.

With measured distinctness, she spoke again.

"Help me save Ariel Burton, Gwen! Tell me now!"

The grey film fell a second time like a sinister shadow. I tried to turn my face away. Death would not be cheated. And then, even as the thought framed itself, Gwendolyn Calvert's hand fluttered to her waist, and her lips murmured the words like a far-off voice on a defective telephone wire:

"The broken fan! Find other half! It—it—"

I wonder if the sentence was finished in eternity? One could almost fancy that the dead lips were still moving. . . .

I saw Madelyn's hand slip under the white shirtwaist, fumble near the red blot on its bosom, and emerge with the jagged half of an ivory fan. On its surface was scribbled in a hurried pencil scrawl the beginning of a notation, which had obviously been finished on the missing section:

"2156 Sy
"Yo"

Madelyn snapped the fan shut, and darted across the hall to the stairs. Even Lieutenant Byron's call

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did not make her pause. When I drew my eyes back from her disappearing figure, the tension in the lobby had broken. The first of the halted groups was already moving through the swinging doors into the street. The unexpected eddy in the life of the Lenox had passed. Doubtless, in a few minutes, the faces that had blanched at the shadow of death would be convulsed by the buffoonery of the vaudeville. I could hear a querulous lady exclaim indignantly that she would be late for the opera!

In a corner of Lieutenant Byron's mouth an unlighted cigar had been thrust nervously all through the short drama. With a mechanical movement, he tossed it to the floor and ground it under his heel.

"Burke," he snapped to his assistant, "I'll leave the rest of the details down here to you. If you need me, you'll find me up-stairs."

"If they should bring our man in, sir —" suggested Burke.

The words recalled me with a start to the fact that we had learned nothing of the details of the crime.

"You are searching for a man with a yellow face, of a Spanish type?" I demanded.

The lieutenant nodded grimly.

"There are two witnesses of the shooting, who

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might have caught the assassin on the spot if they hadn't been so afraid of their own precious lives! Why, our taxicab was turning into the block below at the time. If we had come two minutes sooner — " He broke off abruptly. " It seems to me, Miss Noraker, that you have information to give as well as receive! "

I gazed at Thorny. His forehead was beaded with perspiration, his eyes swollen. On the heels of his wound, the stress of the past five minutes had brought his nerves to the snapping point.

" Oh, there is no occasion now to keep anything back! " he said wearily. " God, to think that, while we were talking up-stairs, Gwen was going to her death, and we could have saved her! "

He glanced across at the still figure on the divan.

" If I ever lay my hands on the brute that killed her, Lieutenant, the police and the courts need not worry about justice! "

The lieutenant reached for a fresh cigar.

" Just now, it occurs to me, Mr. Preston, that you could serve Miss Calvert more wisely by giving me an account of what happened before my arrival on the scene."

Thorny brushed his hair back from his eyes, hesitated a moment, and began the narrative that Madelyn had wormed from his unwilling lips. He finished it as we stepped from the elevator at Miss

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Burton's floor. Lieutenant Byron made no comment as he pressed the bell. There was no answer. Again his finger pushed the disc, and then his hand impatiently caught the handle of the door. It swung open noiselessly. With a growing frown, he led the way into the living-room. And there we paused.

The rose-chamber beyond was flooded with all of its available lights. In the glare, the room presented a curious scene. Drawers were piled on the floor, and their contents dumped into a heap beside them. Stands and mantel had been swept clear. Even the garments of an adjoining closet, cunningly concealed by the wall draperies, had not escaped. The appearance of the room suggested the scene of ravage we had found in Madelyn's den at "The Rosary;" but this time Miss Mack, herself, was responsible for the confusion.

In the center of the havoc, Madelyn was standing, her eyes shot with cold, glinting specks of light. Martha was completing the despoiling of the closet with much the enthusiasm of an unwilling prisoner at the point of a gun.

At the sound of our steps, Miss Mack half turned her head, snapping open her watch.

"Ten-forty! We have until ten-fifty to act, Lieutenant, if we are to avert another tragedy!"

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She extended the section of the broken fan she had taken from Gwendolyn Calvert's waist.

"Somewhere in this room we will find the remainder. And we have just fifteen minutes to do it!"

Lieutenant Byron's eyes narrowed on the notation on the ivory surface, as Madelyn crossed the room, and swept a glance into the dismantled closet.

"You will see that the fan contains a portion of an address," she said over her shoulder. "A life may depend on our completing that address, and reaching it at once!"

From the adjoining room, the telephone sounded. Lieutenant Byron turned mechanically. We could hear his voice replying dully to the summons, and then it was raised sharply. A moment later he was back in the doorway, his face flushing. Madelyn shot a glance in his direction.

"Is it Sewell Collins?"

The lieutenant's lower jaw dropped.

"How in blazes did you know?"

"I didn't know. I merely expected it. How long has he been gone?"

"He hasn't been seen since he left for the Union League Club for dinner. He never reached it. His man is at headquarters now, frantic. Says his master has been murdered!"

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"He hasn't been — yet!" said Madelyn grimly.

The lieutenant passed his hand wearily over his eyes.

"This — this is getting on my nerves, Miss Mack! What's the answer?"

Madelyn pointed to the broken fan in his hand.

"When we find the other half of that trinket, we'll find Ariel Burton, and, likewise, Sewell Collins! Martha tells me her mistress broke the fan recently at the theatre, and lost part of it at the time. Miss Calvert found the part that she lost. *We* must locate the other section!" She jerked her hand toward her watch. "Eight minutes left to do it!"

"And we will find Ariel Burton at the address on the fan?" demanded Lieutenant Byron.

"She has been there for nearly twenty-four hours! Doubtless she engaged the place by telephone at the theatre, and jotted down the notation on the fan. *Why* we'll discover later!"

The lieutenant strode into the chamber, his briskness restored.

"And the fan is hidden in this room?"

"Not hidden!" retorted the enigmatic Miss Mack. "If it were hidden, our task would be simple!"

The lieutenant stooped toward a stack of the heaped-up garments. At his side, Thorny was

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mechanically following his example. Madelyn turned from a last scrutiny of the dressing-table drawers.

"We are wasting time, all of us! And our margin is now a trifle under six minutes! Line up against the wall there — you too, Martha! We will form a class in the science of deduction. We have approached this as a physical problem, and failed. We will now reduce it to a mental problem. Where would a woman entering her room with a broken fan naturally put it — with no purpose of concealment?"

"Dressing-table," responded Thorny.

"Closet," I hazarded.

"Perhaps it was in a pocket of her coat, and she didn't take it out!" suggested Lieutenant Byron.

"Logical, but we have shown all of those answers wrong," said Madelyn wearily. "And two more minutes are gone!"

We made a curious study in emotions as we stood there, for all the world like a group of backward pupils before an impatient teacher. Madelyn stood, with her watch in her hand, staring from face to face as though she would stir our sluggish thoughts by the sheer force of her own will.

"Where else could a woman carry a fan besides her coat pocket or hand bag?" she persisted.

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We stared blankly. And then Madelyn found the answer herself.

"Did Miss Burton carry a muff, Martha?"

"She had three, ma'am. Two are on the chair in the corner there, and the other is on the bed."

Madelyn snatched up the last mentioned, a rich, roomy creation of silver fox, thrust her hand into its depths, and withdrew it slowly.

It was characteristic of her that not a muscle of her face showed her victory. It was not until her hand reached the light that we saw she was holding the missing half of the ivory fan.

Lieutenant Byron sprang to her side, extending the section he still held. The scribbled lines were joined without a break:

"2156 Sycamore Street,
"Yonkers"

Madelyn snapped shut her watch.

"I fancy, Lieutenant, that you will have the pleasure of greeting soon both Miss Burton and Mr. Collins!"

"But the time limit, Miss Mack — ten-fifty-five? I don't understand."

"I found that the next train leaves for Yonkers at eleven-seven, and I allowed a margin of twelve minutes to catch it. Of course, I know that Yonk-

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ers must be our destination. That is the only suburb which the first two letters, 'Y-o,' would fit."

IX.

A CHEERY, old-fashioned house, with cosily blinking lights, met us at the end of a quiet, eminently respectable block in one of the most quiet, most eminently respectable streets of Yonkers. There could be no doubt about the number. We had reached "2156 Sycamore" — and the end of our quest.

I had been picturing vaguely a dim-shadowed dwelling in an obscure corner of town, or perhaps a deserted mansion among sighing trees — the kind you read about in a shivery detective story — as the fitting goal for our search, with an entrance obtained through a cellar window, an ascent of creaking stairs, and a fight in the dark with an unseen enemy. I was conscious of a certain sense of disappointment.

"2156 Sycamore" was thoroughly commonplace, genially matter-of-fact. If there was one thing it lacked, it was assuredly the atmosphere of mystery.

And the manner of our approach could not have been further removed from any suggestion of the dramatic.

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Lieutenant Byron conducted us up the front steps, even pausing to wipe his feet on a strip of matting, and then quite deliberately rang the bell. A serving-man, with a round, expectant face, answered the summons without delay.

The lieutenant stepped past him into a wide hall, motioning us to follow.

"I believe we are expected," he said quietly.

The servant bowed.

"Will you step into the library, sir? I think you are just in time!"

I glanced at the man. Just in time — for what? A moment later I knew! With his most affable smile, he threw open an adjoining door, and waited as eight pairs of eyes whirled toward us. After all, it was an occasion for affable smiles even from a newly hired servant!

I don't know whether we or those whom we had interrupted were the more amazed.

Four persons were standing in the center of the room; a gravely-spectacled gentleman, in a somewhat rusty frock coat, obviously a minister; Miss Ariel Burton, in the most perfect of evening toilettes; Sewell Collins, with his eyes blinking nervously in his pudgy face; and, slightly behind them, the slimly petite figure of Miss Jacqueline.

For just an instant the tableau lasted, and then Miss Madelyn stepped forward.

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"I trust we are not intruding?"

My eyes were riveted on Ariel Burton. Her face had gone white, but her eyes were blazing like two coals. She spoke with a sort of suppressed fury.

"It should be quite evident that you *are* intruding! However, if you will be seated for a few moments —"

Sewell Collins turned back to the minister, and the latter, surveying us in mild disapproval, raised a Bible from a stand at his elbow.

"Unfortunately," replied Madelyn, "we cannot take advantage of your kind invitation."

She continued her advance until she reached the quartet.

"Before the ceremony proceeds, there are certain statements I wish to make, which I feel are necessary to the occasion."

The minister laid back his Bible with a dubious sigh. Sewell Collins turned irritably. Ariel Burton's eyes lost something of their blaze. I fancied she was swaying slightly. Madelyn caught her arm as though to steady her, but later we knew that her purpose was far different.

"Mr. Collins," she began directly, "are you familiar with the history of this lady whom you were about to make your wife?"

Sewell Collins glared.

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"Certainly!"

"You know, then, that you are not marrying Ariel Burton, the actress, but —"

Madelyn held up Miss Burton's right arm. The light played on the tapering fingers, the jeweled rings which covered them, the slenderly rounded thumb. We all stared. Under the thumb nail was a dull, purplish line, indelibly printed on the pink flesh. Even then we did not guess!

From her bag, Madelyn extended to Lieutenant Byron a crumpled newspaper, with a blue-ringed paragraph.

"Will you kindly read aloud the article I have marked?"

In a mechanical tone, the lieutenant complied.

"Sebastian Amador, a planter from Haiti, is registered at the Algonquin Hotel on a curious mission. He is in search of his runaway wife, whom, he charges, deserted him three years ago, and fled from his home under an assumed name. As he describes her, she is a remarkable young woman, of an exceedingly curious history. Her mother was a French woman, of great beauty, and one of the popular actresses of the European stage of a generation ago. At the height of her career she fell in love with a wealthy young Spanish planter of Haiti who was on a visit to Paris. The two were married, and the favorite of the Parisian

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footlights exchanged the stage for a tropical plantation. Here a daughter was born to her, who inherited both her mother's beauty and dramatic ability. It was this daughter whom Amador later married, and who, as he alleges, fled from him after less than a year of married life. After nearly four years of silence from her, he has found a clue to her whereabouts, which leads him to the belief that, through her inherited talents, she has won a spectacular success in the New York theatres. With all the ardor of his Southern blood kindling at the news, and thirsting for a reconciliation, Amador, on receipt of the information, at once sailed for this city.

"And now comes the strangest part of the narrative, rivaling the plot of a sensational novel. The mother of the runaway Señora Amador also fled from her husband twenty-five years ago, leaving behind her newly-born child. The motive of her desertion was the discovery that the man to whom she had given herself was not of pure Spanish blood, as she had believed, but —"

Lieutenant Byron broke off, the balance of the sentence in his throat, as he stared from Madelyn to the swaying form of Ariel Burton.

With a little wrench, the latter slipped from Madelyn's hand. For a moment she stood quivering. The blaze had quite gone from her eyes,

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leaving them sunken embers in the ashes of her cheeks. Suddenly she flung up her right arm.

"There is no need for you to read further. Can't you see it? Feast your eyes on it, all of you — the Purple Thumb!"

The strange-colored ridge under her delicate nail seemed to glow with a dull, throbbing anger. We stared, fascinated. She still held her arm upraised.

"Look well, you whose smug sensibilities I shock! Ah, it means nothing to you! But you do not know Haiti! Must I then explain? I am branded — branded with the birthmark of the negro! *I am a mulatto!*"

She reeled, and then flung back our glances with a sort of wild defiance.

"This is the secret from which my mother fled, and from which I fled when he, whom the law called my husband, made it his taunt! But I could not leave it behind. Always it was with me, mocking me, lashing me, whispering that the world whom I had forced to its knees would sometime know — and then, instead of its bouquets and its jewels and its plaudits, it would hurl my shame back into my face! *And now it does know!*"

With a little moaning cry, she shriveled back into the nearest chair.

Sewell Collins was standing like a man paralyzed — still rigid, when Madelyn darted of a sudden

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past his shoulder. It was then that the rest of us became aware for the first time that a window had opened. Against it crouched a man, raising with sinister steadiness a revolver. Without warning we were whirled to the climax of melodrama.

We saw Madelyn swish across the path of the weapon, her arm flash out and down, and then a yellow flame snapped toward Ariel Burton's chair.

But Madelyn's rush had diverted the muzzle the fraction that meant a spent bullet.

Señor Sebastian Amador crashed back under the impetus of her body into the arms of two men in black derbies, who might have been twin brothers of Lieutenant Byron's "plain-clothes," satellite, as they bobbed up from the window-sill. There came the click of handcuffs as the revolver clattered to the floor. The foremost of the two detectives touched his hat to Lieutenant Byron.

"He shadowed you from the Lenox, sir. When we saw he answered your description of the man wanted for the Calvert murder, we trailed him from town, thinking to spot his game here before we bagged him."

Ariel Burton had straightened in her chair. Her gaze clung to Amador's yellowish face, as his voice raised.

"If I didn't get you one way, I reckon I have in another — maybe worse from your way of

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judging! You played a clever game with your mysterious vanishing act to escape me, and what I might have to tell the man you wanted to marry; but you might have known better than to match yourself against me. So you were going to capture a millionaire husband, and play the high lady, you — you — "

"Don't!" The protest was wrung from Ariel Burton like a dry groan.

One of the detectives clapped his hand over Amador's lips.

"Shall we take him outside, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Byron nodded.

"And — Franklin, see that you don't cut your margins so confoundedly close in future!"

Instinctively our gaze focused next on the figure of Sewell Collins. I will own at once that my estimate of his stamina had been sadly underrated. I had looked to see him perhaps in a state of collapse. Instead he had shaken off his stupor and was surveying us with a glint in his eyes that I had never thought to see there. Perhaps it was a flash of the rugged will of the old steel foundry days, which the emergency of the moment had awakened down under the ravages of midnight Broadway.

He addressed the bewildered clerical gentleman with a touch of business-like crispness which I'll venture his voice had not held for years.

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"Here is the fee, sir, which I believe you would have expected under other circumstances. I shall not need your services further this evening!"

The minister fingered the yellow-backed bill nervously, cleared his throat, found voice sufficient for a murmured "good night," and shambled rather reluctantly toward the door. I have often wondered what impressions the experiences of the evening must have left in his peaceful, clerical brain!

As the door closed behind his retreating figure, Sewell Collins turned to Madelyn.

"And now, Miss Mack, I will be obliged for a more detailed statement than you have yet given me."

"May I ask you first to explain your presence here?"

"I was descending from my car at the Union League Club when a note was handed me by a young woman, whom I recognized as Miss Burton's maid, stating that she was in trouble, and pleading that I accompany the messenger to her at once, and without publicity."

"I surmised that that was probably the way it was done," said Madelyn musingly. "And what explanation was given you when you arrived?"

Sewell Collins shifted his position to avoid looking at Ariel Burton.

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"As a matter of fact, none — nor did I ask for any. I — I loved Miss Burton honestly. When I saw her I repeated my offer of the protection of my name, a step which I had suggested for some time, and urged an immediate marriage."

Madelyn glanced at the crumpled form beyond Mr. Collins' shoulder, as she continued the story.

"I should say at the outset that Miss Burton had divorced Amador, a fact unknown to him until after his arrival in New York. She had dissolved his legal claims to her.

"The secret of her life had been buried so deep that it seemed impossible of resurrection. The gulf between Ariel Burton, the petted theatrical star, with her name in six-foot electric letters, and the obscure mulatto girl of Haiti, appeared impassable. She had made a new career for herself, had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, was flattered, admired, feted. A millionaire had offered her marriage. And then came the first of the letters of the Purple Thumb.

"She saw her castle of cards crashing, the brand of her birth exposed, herself dragged back to all from which she had fled.

"Amador was shrewd enough to make his personal communications to her purposely vague, and to supplement them through the newspapers. Only her identity was hidden. But she lived in constant

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terror that the next screaming 'Extra' would reveal it.

"We received a proof of Amador's desperation when, furious at the disappearance of his victim, he murdered his tool, Gwendolyn Calvert, in the belief that she had betrayed him. Whether he was animated by an insane jealousy, or coveted the spoils of the blackmailer, or both, I am convinced that, had the marriage to-night been consummated, while he was at large, sooner or later Miss Burton's life would have paid the forfeit. Incidentally, it was this last consideration — we must not mince words! — the knowledge that she was in imminent danger of losing the position that, as Mrs. Sewell Collins, she would hold, which completed her despair, and determined her on the bold coup of her disappearance."

A suggestion of weariness slipped into Madelyn's voice.

"It was necessary not only to elude her Nemesis, but — and again we must speak frankly! — allow herself opportunity for her marital ambition. In other words, she must vanish — and yet still remain in touch with her world. The theatre offered the most effective background for her plans. How was it possible to spirit herself away from a crowded playhouse so that the manner of her disappearance would not be detected?

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"In the end, she decided to make use of the obvious means of a trunk."

"But you said that was *not* the agency she employed!" I protested accusingly.

"I said she did not disappear *in* a trunk!" said Madelyn impatiently. "The trunk which answered her purpose was carried from her dressing-room some time before its owner vanished. In fact, after it was gone she played through a portion of an act. Ariel Burton was not concealed in the trunk — but Jacqueline, her maid!"

"You forget," interrupted Thorny, heedless of Madelyn's glare at another break in her narrative, "that Jacqueline was as much in evidence after the trunk had gone as Miss Burton."

"She was not," snapped Madelyn. "The young woman whom we regarded as the maid, who gave the hysterical alarm of Ariel Burton's disappearance, was not Jacqueline — *but her mistress!* Ariel Burton vanished by assuming the costume and rôle of her maid after she entered her dressing-room to change her gown for the last of the second act! If we had looked into the room during her absence on the stage, we would have found it empty. But that was a chance she had to take. And it was empty again when Miss Burton, in the character of Jacqueline, came out on an ostensible errand of her mistress — and returned to startle us

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with the announcement that the actress had vanished!

"As a matter of fact, *while we searched frantically for Ariel Burton, she was at our elbows!*

"In the meantime, the trunk, containing the obliging Miss Jacqueline, had arrived at the Lenox. Miss Burton, leaving the theatre, still in the rôle of her maid, returned to her apartments, released Jacqueline, and with her aid packed the trunk, and relocked it. Martha, the housekeeper, had been given a convenient leave of absence. When the task was finished, Miss Burton, leaving her maid at the flat as a sort of scout in the enemy's country, made her way to the house she had rented in Yonkers — and awaited developments. I think that completes the statement you desired, Mr. Collins."

Thorny had drawn a memorandum book from his pocket during the latter portion of the recital.

"If you don't mind, Miss Mack, there is one other point. I will confess that I essayed the rôle of amateur detective, myself — with the usual results. To aid me, I tried to make a chronological table of everything that occurred on the stage during the evening. I find that, contrary to your statement, both Miss Burton and her maid were in the dressing-room after the trunk had been sent

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away! We distinctly heard their two voices while we were before the door!"

"My dear Mr. Preston!" retorted Madelyn in a tone that made Thorny wince, "as a playwright, there is no doubt of your ability. In future, I would advise you to confine your activities to that field! We heard two voices as you suggest — apparently. But they emanated from Miss Burton alone. Your stage training should have been the first to suggest the explanation. Miss Burton was using her dramatic ability to carry on an imaginary conversation — and I am prepared to admit that she succeeded admirably!"

Sewell Collins snapped open his watch.

"I think that is all, Miss Mack!"

Ariel Burton still sat crumpled in her chair, her eyes on the floor. Sewell Collins glanced at her, hesitated, and drew from his pocket a slender, morocco-covered check book. He opened it, and produced a fountain pen. For a moment he wrote deliberately.

"Miss Burton — or should I say Señora Amador? — I had expected to present you with this as a wedding present!"

He laid a delicately engraved slip of paper on the stand, and, with a bow to us, walked to the door.

"Miss Mack," he said, turning with an after-

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thought, "you will hear from me by mail to-morrow."

And then occurred that which, to me, has always seemed the most incomprehensible incident of the whole grotesque affair.

Ariel Burton roused herself.

"Just a moment, Mr. Collins!"

With the slip of paper in her hand, she stepped after him.

"You have not given me an opportunity to thank you. I am, indeed, grateful for your kindness!"

With a sudden movement she tore the check into quarters, and, bowing slightly, scattered on the floor the fragments of the order for two hundred thousand dollars.

Sewell Collins stared, opened his lips, and then closed the door after him.

With a little shrug, Ariel Burton returned to her chair, and leaned her elbows wearily on the stand. In its center was the only intimate object in the room, a mauve-bordered photograph of Sewell Collins. She reached across and laid it face downward.

Lieutenant Byron turned awkwardly, and led us in our turn from the room. At the door, we saw that Ariel Burton had again picked up the photograph.

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"I wonder if she loved him after all?" I asked softly.

"I should say that is just the question she is putting to herself," said Madelyn drily.

It was not until we turned into the street for our walk back to the station that the silence was broken again, and then Lieutenant Byron spoke.

"You will understand my professional curiosity, Miss Mack, when I ask how you did it!"

Madelyn laughed.

"I was wondering how long you would wait for that question! It is when we drift away from the ear-marks of the professional criminal, where the card-index methods of headquarters are of no avail, that the lack of imagination in the police department is evident.

"For instance, the first three clues in the riddle of Miss Burton's dressing-room were a cigarette stub on the dressing table, a hair brush, and the ornament of the golden butterfly. The cigarette and the brush were both on the *left* side of the table, suggesting obviously that the last occupant of the room was a left-handed woman who smoked.

"When I found that it was not Miss Burton, but her maid, who was the nicotine devotee, and when I was told, later, that Miss Burton was right-handed, and saw that the maid was left-handed,

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my half-crystallized theory received a set-back until I was informed by the housekeeper that the actress could on occasion use *both* hands with equal dexterity.

"There were three explanations which could account for Miss Burton's disappearance. One of these was the substitution of herself in the character of her servant. This involved the physical elimination of the latter. How? The golden butterfly gave the first suggestion. The most natural use for the ornament was as the handle of a knife. If this were the case, the blade had been snapped, evidently in some violent test of its strength. What, for example?

"If a trunk had entered into the affair, we might fairly assume that the breaking of the knife had occurred in the making or enlarging of a breathing outlet for the imprisoned occupant.

"When I saw that the trunk at the Lenox contained no evidence of such mutilation, I was at a loss until, on a second examination this evening, I found from an interior view that a luggage-label had been neatly pasted over the hole that had been made with augur and knife for Miss Jacqueline's benefit. I infer that the trunk had been previously prepared for the emergency, but that, in the moment of service, an enlargement of the air-hole was found necessary."

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Lieutenant Taylor walked on in a silence, which from him was perhaps a more sincere appreciation than words.

I may state here that in due course Sebastian Amador was led to the electric chair at Sing Sing. And, as the postscript of my story is largely personal, it would be as well to gather up at this point, also, the loose threads as to my other characters.

Something less than a week after the final chapter of our drama, Sewell Collins sailed for Europe. Through our Paris correspondent, we learned that he spent the next three months at the German baths. His career as a Broadway patron has never been renewed.

Of Ariel Burton — as Ariel Burton — we have heard or seen nothing since that memorable night in Yonkers. Perhaps somewhere, under a different name, she has begun her stage career anew. I never enter a theatre that I do not find myself scanning the stage for some suggestion of the vanished "star" of "The Girl from Milwaukee." . . .

We were nearing the Yonkers station when Madelyn glanced back at Thorny and me.

"I was very nearly forgetting something, Nora.

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This is evidently your property. I found it on the back stairs of the Lenox in the trail of Gwendolyn Calvert's flight."

She extended an unsealed envelope, addressed to me at *The Bugle* office. There are those who say that a crisis in one's life casts a preparatory shadow. For my part, I opened the letter from the dead without a suspicion of the message it held for me.

"My dear Miss Noraker:

"I don't know why I am writing this. Something stronger than my own will tells me that I should do it — and do it *now*, or it will be too late. Is it a hunch that something is about to happen to me — something different from anything Gwen has yet found on the boards?

"When I told you that Thorny Preston had promised to marry me, I did not tell you the truth. Maybe, you can understand the hysteria of a woman with a hopeless love. I doubt it. Few women can — who haven't been through it!

"And I know now, too, that Mr. Preston's conversation with Miss Burton had a much different meaning than that which I supposed. But this is not alone the rea-

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son for my writing you. It is to tell you the name of the woman whom Mr. Preston *does* love.

"On second thought, however, I am not going to do it! If you cannot guess it for yourself, you do not deserve to know.

"GWENDOLYN CALVERT."

A truant wind whisked the letter from my hand, as I finished it under the glare of a corner light. With a gasp I saw Thorny Preston spring forward and rescue it from the Yonkers gutter. He straightened to return it and then paused. His glance had caught mechanically his name on the crumpled page.

He raised his eyes inquiringly, saw my flaming face under the arc-lamp, and then, without a word, read the note deliberately. I gathered up my skirts, and fled. I thought I heard him call after me.

We were midway in our early morning ride back to town when Thorny, swinging out of the smoker, paused at my seat.

"By the way, Nora, who is the society editor of *The Bugle* since Miss Williams left?"

"Why?" I asked, unsuspecting.

"I thought perhaps you might not like to write

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the announcement of your own wedding. We are to be married this afternoon!"

The world whirled about my ears, as I stared back at him. And then —

"A proposal in a railroad car!" I flared.

Thorny grinned.

"My dear girl, I thought you had been a reporter long enough to appreciate the human interest element!"

THE END.

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MISS BILLY—MARRIED

A Sequel to "Miss Billy" and "Miss Billy's Decision"

By Eleanor H. Porter

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